9th Grade, By the Numbers

Alamin Smith, left, with his friend Victor Herrera, heads through a mural-covered hallway at Kelvyn Park High School in Chicago on his way to an after-school tutoring session. —John Zich for Education Week

The Chicago district has provided every high school in the city with detailed data about its 9th grade class. Now, it's up to the schools to help teenagers make it through their freshman year.

By **Catherine Gewertz**

Chicago

Even before Alamin Smith set foot in Kelvyn Park High School last fall, the woman who would be his 9th grade counselor knew he would need extra help.

All the information was right there for Kathryn McAuley, in a color-coded spreadsheet: Alamin had missed more than three dozen days of school in 8th grade. He had failed reading and mathematics, so he had to go to summer school to make them up.

Photo & Audio

9th Grade By the Numbers
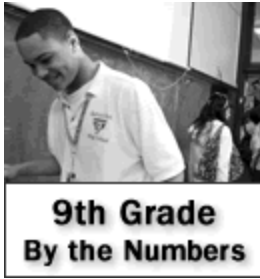
For big urban districts, it can be slippery work to catch and hold students who are falling off track at a point that derails too many graduations: the transition from 8th to 9th grade.

To stem those losses, the Chicago school district is putting a suite of new data reports into the hands of Ms. McAuley and others who teach and counsel its 30,000 freshmen this year. Together, the reports are intended as an early-warning system that can mobilize the necessary support to keep 9th graders on course to finish high school in four years.

"This is supposed to be pre-emptive and super-proactive, to know who is coming to you and have a plan in place," said Paige A. Ponder, the director of the 408,000-student district's **Department of Graduation Pathways**, a part of its **Office of High Schools**.

Armed with the knowledge that Alamin had had trouble in 8th grade, his counselor didn't need to wait for progress reports to tell her that he risked sliding into trouble. She already knew. So did his teachers, who had seen the same information before school started.

Alamin Smith works on a history lesson in class at Kelvyn Park High School in Chicago, where the school district provides high schools with detailed information to monitor 9th graders' progress and support them on a path to graduation.
—John Zich for Education Week

They watched the freshman and shared their observations in weekly team meetings. And they could see his 8th grade habits shadowing him into high school: He was blowing off homework, skipping class, and misbehaving when he did show up.

Ms. McAuley began chatting with Alamin to see what was up. By the fifth week of school, an updated spreadsheet had come out, showing that he was failing two classes. His teachers met with him, and together they drew up a plan that included tutoring and more-tailored attention in class.

Alamin is getting help. He savors his triumphs, but he also suffers setbacks. So do the teachers and counselors who work with him. On this jagged road, there are "aha!" days, when the data and conversation pinpoint students' needs more clearly than ever, and help is given, and the grades inch upward. And there are dispiriting days, when the needs outstrip the available support.

The district defines an "on track" freshman as one who earns five credits by the end of the school year and has not failed more than one semester of

math, English, science, or social studies. That definition draws on the work of the **Consortium on Chicago School Research**, which has found that failing grades in core courses and weak credit accumulation in 9th grade raise the odds that a student will not finish high school on time.

Keeping an Eye Out

The school district gathers statistics to gauge whether 9th graders are accumulating enough credit to graduate in four years.

Freshman On-Track Rate, Full School Year		
	Chicago Public Schools	Kelvyn Park High School
2007	57.1%	57.1%
2008	59.5	59.5

Freshman On-Track Rate, First Semester		
	Chicago Public Schools	Kelvyn Park High School

Note: Chicago's first-semester on-track rate is calculated by looking at the grades and credit accumulation of freshmen at the end of the first semester and projecting what portion are on track to graduate in four years. It does not include dropouts, students who transfer if their receiving schools cannot be verified, or students who are repeating 9th grade. The district's official freshman on-track rate, calculated at the end of the year, is based on final grades and credit accumulation, and factors in dropouts and unverified transfers.

SOURCE: Chicago Public Schools Office of High Schools and High School Programs

The data reports are one part of Chicago's focus on keeping students in school and making progress during the risky period from late 8th grade to the end of 9th grade. The district introduced an expanded portfolio of orientation, enrichment, and skills-building programs at students' future high schools last spring and summer, most for four to six weeks. It made a big push to get incoming freshmen into summer online credit-recovery courses, and launched "freshmen on-pace" to help them recover lost credits during lunch, after school, on Saturdays, or via the Internet.

The spreadsheets about incoming 9th graders went to all 116 Chicago public high schools. Kelvyn Park is one of six that won grants to put two extra district staff members on campus full time to help teachers figure out how best to use the data to support freshmen. Each of those "on-track labs" is

trying different approaches and sharing them with district supervisors so other schools can learn what works best.

The grants are funded by the district and the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**. (The foundation also underwrites *Education Week's* annual report on high school graduation, *Diplomas Count.*)
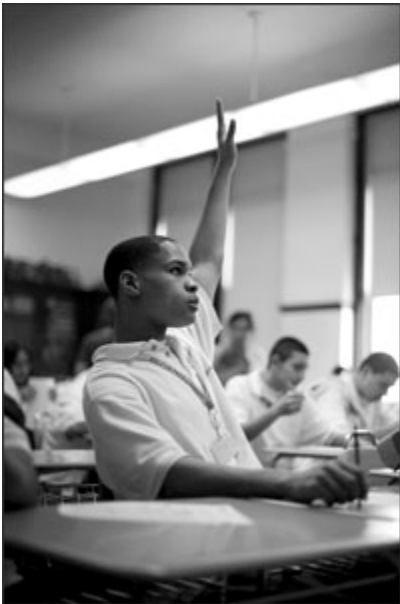
Alamin raises his hand to answer a question in April Burmeister's math class. With his teachers' help, the student decided he needed to sit farther away from peers who could distract him to try to bring up his grades.
—John Zich for Education Week

In the suite of freshman data reports issued by the district, the first is the "watch list." Arriving several weeks before school starts, it profiles each student's 8th grade year: math and English grades, attendance, scores on the ACT's Explore test, and whether he or she had to attend summer courses to make up failed 8th grade work. Students who earned D's or lower in math or English for the year are flagged for academic intervention and color-coded orange. Nine unexcused absences trigger attendance intervention and a color code of dark orange. Students with both poor academic and attendance records are color-coded yellow.

A "success report," generated five weeks into the first quarter, lists each student's 9th grade attendance and grades in the four core subjects. Too

many unexcused absences, or grades of D or lower, alert staff members that help is needed. The success report is updated every five weeks.

As first semester ends, the district issues a "credit recovery" report—not just for freshmen, but for all students—identifying which ones need to be scheduled for extra study to earn back credits lost during first semester. Another such report comes out toward the end of second semester.

At Kelvyn Park High, a school of 1,500 students in a hardscrabble neighborhood eight miles northwest of Chicago's Loop, the early-August arrival of the watch list got the attention of Alamin Smith's teachers and sparked several one-on-one sessions with his counselor. Five weeks into the term, the success report, showing F's in two classes, triggered the meeting with his teachers.

They asked what he needed; he said he knew he had to work on raising his hand before speaking in class. But he also needed to sit farther away from distracting peers, and he wanted teachers to check on him more often in class. And he also needed a backpack so he would be sure to have all of his stuff for class. The teachers shaped that discussion into a contract for improvement, and everyone signed it. It included weekly meetings with his counselor and lunchtime tutoring. They also bought him the backpack.

"They told me I was getting help, and I knew I needed it," Alamin, 16, said during a recent class break.

Alamin leaves his math class.

But by the next success-report update, at 10 weeks, Alamin had failing grades in all but one of his courses. Staff members pulled him out for "academic boot camp" sessions. By 15 weeks, the data sheets showed his grades on the rise in three courses. By the end of first semester, Alamin was boasting an A in English.

"He was really excited," Ms. McAuley said. "It was the first A he ever had. He told me, 'I didn't know I could do that.' "

First-semester grades also included some less-rosy news, however. Along with the A in English came F's in biology and world history. That meant Alamin had lost one credit and was officially "off track." The credit-recovery report, issued at the semester mark, alerted Kelvyn Park's staff to sign Alamin up for credit-recovery class. He'll get a half-credit for the sessions from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. that he now tacks on to his school day three times a week. He's scheduled to earn the other half-credit over the summer.

Before the new reports were available, what Chicago's high school educators knew about their new freshmen varied widely. The data were in district office cabinets, but not all high school administrators were aggressive in procuring them, or in harvesting anecdotal information from feeder middle schools about the entering class. This school year marks the first time that all the information, for every student, has been methodically assembled and sent to every city high school.

Alamin shares a laugh over lunch in the school's cafeteria.

"When you are trying to get it through conversations, you get it for some kids, but not all," said Sandra M. Fontánez-Phelan, who is in her seventh year as Kelvyn Park's principal. "This is systematic, and it's all of our kids."

In addition to offering a good initial outline of students' needs, the reports help fine-tune accountability for teachers, she said. The principal shares with teachers the rates at which students pass their courses, and bases evaluations in part on how teachers improve those rates and how they use the data to monitor students and intervene with help.

Kelvyn Park's data show some early promise: At the end of first semester, according to district calculations, 84.5 percent of its freshmen were on track to graduate in four years, compared with 73.6 percent two years ago.

History teacher Andy Jarmoc stops by Alamin's desk.
—John Zich for Education Week

Without two educators dedicated to working with the data and helping staff members design interventions, though, it would be tough to turn the information into real help for students, Ms. Fontánez-Phelan said. Kelvyn Park's "on-track-lab coordinators" recrunch the numbers in many ways for teachers, calculate the school's own on-track and course-failure rates, gather information from 8th grade teams, and help tutor. They are also building a database that lets teachers click in to students' profiles and review, for instance, summaries of when they skipped class, when a counselor called home, or that they were referred for math tutoring.

Kelvyn Park's structure has made it easier to make good use of the data in the new reports, according to staff members there. Freshmen are divided into three small learning communities, or "houses," and a grant affords teachers paid time to meet weekly to discuss their teaching and their students. That's an ideal forum to pore over student data and analyze how one student is doing across multiple classes, and what that suggests for his or her teachers.

Roads to Success

Chicago's Graduation Pathways strategy, launched in February 2008, seeks to use data to improve outcomes for at-risk and out-of-school youths. Below are some of the ways it focuses on incoming freshmen.

PREVENTION

• **Freshmen Watch List:** Alerts high schools to every incoming freshman's grades, attendance, and test scores to profile their needs
• **Freshmen Success Reports:** Periodic updates of each freshman's data
• **Freshmen Connection:** Orientation and skills-building programs for entering students

EARLY INTERVENTION

• **Achievement Academies:** Two-year program at eight schools for overage students not qualified to enter high school
• **Small Learning Communities**
• **Credit-Recovery Report:** Twice-yearly list of students who need to regain lost credits

CREDIT RECOVERY

• **Lunchtime, after-school, or Saturday sessions** for freshmen who risk graduating late because they failed courses
• **Evening high school**
• **Online courses**
• **Summer school**

RE-ENROLLMENT AND RE-ENGAGEMENT

• **Saturday study** and community service for expelled students or those with discipline violations
• **Alternative placements** of students expelled for behavior problems
• Individually designed **re-entry options** for students ages 17 to 21 who did not complete high school or those returning from juvenile-justice system
• **YES Initiative:** anti-gang-violence initiative focusing on juvenile offenders and incoming freshmen

SOURCE: Chicago Public Schools Office of High Schools and High School Programs

"Before, we wouldn't have known how kids were doing in the other classes," said Sara Mizener, who teaches English and a freshman course about transitioning to high school. "Now, we get a picture of the whole freshman class and of our particular house. As teachers, we can see how we are doing with a student compared to other teachers."

Teachers have used the watch list to tailor instruction. "Having that information before school even started was a great way to think about my kids' strengths and weaknesses, and how I could individualize instruction," said English teacher Bethany Kaufmann.

It also allowed school staff members to design class schedules that would be more appropriate for individual students. In team meetings early in the school year, teachers observed that some students seemed to be in classes that were too easy or too hard for them. Checking the watch list typically offered confirming evidence. So students' schedules were reshuffled.

Lahari Goud, one of the on-track-lab coordinators at Kelvyn Park High, winces as she recalls the disruptions that caused for some students. But she still thinks it was better to get the placements right a few weeks into the year than not at all. Next year, the staff hopes to use the watch list to inform class scheduling before classes begin.

Because the spreadsheets list grades and absences for every student, not just those who are in real trouble, Kelvyn Park staff members find that they are discovering more "on the cusp" students who need help.

"I work with far more students than ever before, and I'm getting more students in the midrange now," said Natalie Garfield, the school's literacy coach. The downside? She's working more hours than ever before, and is acutely aware that she can't help all those who need it. "It's challenging," she said with a smile.

As the school day ends, Alamin walks his girlfriend, Maran Angeli Velasquez, out of school as he prepares to head off for his tutoring session.
—John Zich for Education Week

And with more students getting referred for academic help, the staff finds itself hard-pressed to supply enough tutoring. Ms. Goud and Ms. Garfield hurriedly improvised an academic boot camp by pulling needy students out of class. Other teachers pinch-hit for that duty as well. It's frustrating to be able to offer only a few sessions to each student, Ms. Goud said, but "at least it's something."

That kind of frustration is precisely what Ms. Ponder, the director of the district's department of graduation pathways, would anticipate at this early point in Chicago's data project. After all, it's one thing to have a trove of data that better outlines the problems. But it's another to be fully equipped to solve them.

"I would expect people to spend a year or more freaking out about, 'How am I going to address those needs?' That's where we're at," Ms. Ponder said.

"That is what will force us to have the hard conversations about what we need to do, how we need to reallocate resources in our schools, or how to prioritize what we need to do most."

Coverage of pathways to college and careers is underwritten in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.