

EVERY STUDENT MATTERS

ENSURING ON-TIME GRADUATION FOR HISPANIC AND BLACK LEARNERS

Shannon E. Coulter, Ph.D.



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“ I Don’t See the Point Anymore. ”

LEFT BEHIND IN 9TH GRADE

Catalina started 9th grade with cautious optimism. She had always been a bright, curious student, but the transition to high school felt overwhelming. Her new school, Franklin High, was underfunded and overcrowded. The hallways were lined with aging lockers, and the classrooms were stuffed with too many students for the few teachers available. Catalina’s homeroom teacher, already juggling five other classes, barely had time to learn students’ names, let alone provide personalized support. Despite her determination to succeed, Catalina’s path was riddled with obstacles—many of them beyond her control.

Catalina’s family, rooted in their rich Hispanic culture, had struggled with housing insecurity for years, moving frequently between apartments and sometimes staying with relatives. By the time she started high school, she was commuting a half hour each way by bus to Franklin High. The long commutes and late nights helping her younger siblings with homework left her exhausted. Food insecurity compounded her challenges. Catalina often went to school hungry, distracted by the gnawing emptiness that made concentrating in class almost impossible. One morning, her stomach growled audibly during first period. The teacher, Mrs. Lopez, gave her a sympathetic look.

“Catalina, are you okay?” Mrs. Lopez asked gently as the class worked on math problems.

“I’m fine,” Catalina replied quickly, lowering her head. She wasn’t about to admit she hadn’t eaten breakfast—or dinner the night before.

The cracks began to show early. Catalina struggled to complete homework and failed her first math test. Her

teacher referred her to after-school tutoring, but the sessions conflicted with her bus schedule. When Catalina tried to explain the issue to Mr. Turner, her math teacher, he sighed in frustration.

“I wish I could do something, Catalina,” he said. “But our tutors are only available after school. Can you ask someone at home to pick you up later?”

“There’s no one,” Catalina said, her voice barely above a whisper. “We don’t have a car, and my mom works late.”

Her absences piled up as she missed school to help her mother navigate public assistance programs and care for her siblings. By the end of the first semester, Catalina had failed two core courses and was already deemed “off track” for on-time graduation. Although Franklin High had an early warning system to flag struggling students, the overworked staff didn’t follow up, and Catalina became another data point in a school already stretched too thin.

By sophomore year, Catalina’s academic confidence had eroded. Her repeated struggles left her feeling alienated, and she began skipping classes. When a counselor called her into the office to discuss her absences, Catalina shrugged.

“I don’t see the point anymore,” she said. “Even if I pass everything now, I’ll never catch up.”

“Catalina, we can help,” the counselor said. “There are credit recovery options—”

“Like what?” Catalina cut in. “Staying after school when I don’t even have a way to get home? Missing more days of work for my mom? It’s too late.”



WHY SCHOOLS MUST FOCUS ON THE 9TH GRADE TRANSITION FOR HISPANIC AND BLACK STUDENTS

Catalina’s story reflects a systemic failure—a combination of under-resourced schools, structural inequities, and a lack of timely interventions that disproportionately impact students like her. It underscores why 9th grade is a pivotal period in students’ educational journeys. Success during this critical year strongly predicts high school graduation, readiness for college and career, and immediate college enrollment (Smith & Jones, 2021). Research emphasizes the importance of staying “on track” during 9th grade, as students who fall behind at this stage face significantly higher risks of not graduating on time, regardless of their prior academic performance (Davis et al., 2018). However, for students like Catalina, staying on track is often a much steeper climb, requiring systemic change and targeted support to ensure every student has the chance to succeed.

To truly understand the challenges students like Catalina face, we must examine the broader systemic inequities that disproportionately affect Black and Hispanic students in our community. These inequities, deeply embedded in the social fabric, extend beyond the classroom and manifest in barriers like food insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare—all of which compound the difficulties of staying on track in school.

Food insecurity, for example, impacts about 10% of families in San Diego, but its burden is not evenly distributed. Schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic students often see significantly higher proportions

of food-insecure families. Black students face the highest rates of adverse life events, while Hispanic children are more likely than any other group to experience housing insecurity and have the least access to healthcare (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Rabbitt et al., 2024). Furthermore, families with fewer resources often depend on public transportation, spending more time commuting and navigating unreliable transit systems, and having less time to complete important school-related tasks (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). These challenges do not stem from who these students are but from the systemic conditions they face, which ripple through schools and contribute to disparities in academic performance and on-time graduation. Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive approach that not only highlights the root causes but also ensures every student has equitable opportunities to succeed.

The Need to Rethink the 9th Grade Year

The freshman year serves as a foundational period for students’ academic and social development. It is a year of transition, where students are expected to adapt to more rigorous academic demands, navigate larger and more complex social environments, and take greater responsibility for their learning. Falling off track during this time often leads to cumulative academic deficits, reduced confidence, and disengagement from school. Without timely interventions, these challenges can create a ripple effect that undermines students’ ability to recover and succeed, ultimately impacting graduation rates, college readiness, and long-term career opportunities.

To address these issues, we need to rethink the 9th grade experience as a critical point for targeted support and systemic innovation. Early identification of off-track students enables educators to deploy timely, targeted interventions, such as mentoring, high-impact tutoring, and credit recovery programs, that can mitigate risks before they become insurmountable. Schools must also consider restructuring 9th grade curricula to be more engaging and accessible, ensuring it is culturally responsive and aligned with students’ unique needs and experiences. This includes fostering strong relationships between students and teachers, emphasizing

social-emotional learning (SEL), and creating programs that ease the transition from middle school to high school.

Furthermore, a reimagined 9th grade experience should address systemic inequities by ensuring all students—particularly those from marginalized communities—have equitable access to rigorous coursework, extracurricular activities, and support services. Schools can also adopt early warning systems (EWS) that flag at-risk students based on attendance, grades, and behavior, allowing for proactive intervention. By addressing challenges as they emerge and creating an environment that prioritizes equity and support, schools can prevent setbacks, boost engagement, and set students on a trajectory toward academic and personal success. Rethinking the 9th grade experience is not just about improving outcomes for individual students—it is an investment in the long-term health and equity of our education system as a whole.

The Need for Targeted Interventions for Black and Hispanic Students

National and regional data highlight persistent disparities in educational outcomes for Hispanic and Black students, who disproportionately face higher dropout rates, lower on-time graduation rates, and reduced access to post-secondary opportunities compared to their White and Asian peers (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2020). Contributing factors include under-resourced schools, higher rates of poverty, implicit biases in the classroom, and limited access to rigorous coursework. Catalina’s challenges—long commutes, food insecurity, and a lack of personalized support—are shared by many Black and Hispanic students, underscoring that these disparities are not just statistics but real barriers that affect students’ lives. Addressing these systemic issues is not just a matter of policy but a moral imperative in education. Ensuring equitable access to quality education honors the principle that every child deserves the opportunity to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 2006). By dismantling these barriers and investing in strategies that support students like Catalina, educators and policymakers can create a more just and inclusive educational system that uplifts

all students and gives every child a real opportunity to thrive.

In San Diego, Hispanic and Black students comprise a significant portion of the student population. The challenges Black and Hispanic students disproportionately face, coupled with the importance of 9th grade as a turning point, call for a strategic focus on interventions tailored for these groups. Furthermore, ignoring the evidence on Black and Hispanic students’ experiences would perpetuate existing disparities. Without targeted interventions, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to remain off-track during critical transition periods like 9th grade. This would exacerbate the disparities in on-time graduation rates, as highlighted by this report, where Black and Hispanic students already graduate at rates significantly below their peers. Finally, addressing these findings might mitigate these systemic barriers and lead to improved access to rigorous courses, more culturally responsive teaching practices, and better early-warning systems, all of which potentially benefit these groups. If we know these solutions are effective and will enhance access to high-quality education, we have an obligation to act.

This report underscores that addressing these issues is not just about improving statistics; it is about fostering a fair, inclusive, and supportive educational environment that can transform lives and strengthen communities.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE ON-TIME GRADUATION

1. On- and Off-Track Status is Fluid and Recoverable

Nearly half of the students classified as off-track by the end of 9th grade in this study are close to meeting the criteria to return to on-track status. This underscores the potential for recovery if schools provide timely and targeted interventions. Schools might consider developing more flexible credit recovery programs and personalized learning plans that allow students to catch up on failed courses or missing credits. Schools could implement summer programs, high-impact tutoring, and mentoring initiatives to support students in regaining on-track status.

2. Early and Targeted Interventions Are Critical

Students who are marginally off-track graduate on time at significantly higher rates than those further off track, highlighting the importance of early identification and support. Schools might utilize early warning systems (EWS) to monitor student performance in real-time. These systems could flag attendance issues, failing grades, and course enrollment gaps, enabling educators to intervene promptly with tailored solutions.

3. Equitable Opportunities for Black and Hispanic Students is Imperative

The overrepresentation of Hispanic and Black students in off-track categories and their lower on-time graduation rates point to inequities that can be addressed through targeted action. Schools can take concrete steps to ensure all students have access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed. For instance, implementing culturally

responsive teaching practices can create more inclusive learning environments. Professional development programs for educators can focus on identifying and addressing implicit biases that affect student outcomes. Moreover, schools should proactively ensure equitable access to rigorous coursework, academic advising, and support services, such as high-impact tutoring or mentoring, to help all students stay on track for graduation.

4. Strong 9th grade Foundations Promote Long-Term Success

Students who are on track at the end of 9th grade have significantly higher on-time graduation rates and college enrollment rates than their off-track peers. Schools might focus resources on creating a supportive and engaging 9th grade experience. This could include orientation programs to ease the transition to high school, fostering strong student-teacher relationships, and emphasizing social-emotional learning (SEL) to keep students engaged and motivated.

5. Acknowledging Systemic Inequities and Focusing on School-Based Solutions

While external factors such as food insecurity, housing instability, and unreliable transportation significantly impact students’ ability to succeed academically, many of these challenges fall outside the direct control of schools. However, schools play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of these systemic inequities through targeted interventions that can provide critical support during the school day. For example:

- **Food insecurity:** While schools cannot eliminate food insecurity entirely, they can reduce its impact by ensuring access to free or reduced-price meal programs and offering additional support such as grab-and-go weekend meal options.
- **Transportation issues:** Schools can address transportation barriers by scheduling interventions like tutoring or mentoring during school hours or providing virtual options that students can access from home.

By focusing on what is within their locus of control, schools can deploy resources more effectively. Interventions such as high-impact tutoring, culturally responsive teaching and resources, and early-warning systems can help students overcome challenges that arise from inequitable systemic conditions, enabling them to stay on track academically despite external obstacles.

These key takeaways provide a roadmap for schools to create equitable, supportive systems that address the challenges students face during their critical 9th grade year. By prioritizing early identification, culturally responsive practices, and targeted interventions, schools can significantly improve on-time graduation rates and support long-term student success.



WHAT KEY FINDINGS SHAPED THE STUDY’S TAKEAWAYS?

This study focused on understanding the dynamics of on- and off-track graduation and college enrollment rates among students in 94 high schools across San Diego. We defined “on-track” status as earning at least two course credits in three of the four core subjects—English, mathematics, science, and social studies—and passing any additional classes by the end of a student’s 9th grade year. This benchmark not only reflects academic progress but also serves as a proxy for the foundational habits and support systems necessary for long-term success.

The report below highlights key findings along with practical tips designed to address many of the underlying root causes behind them.

Black and Hispanic students graduate high school on time at lower rates compared to their peers

The table below shows the graduation rates of students in the class of 2016, who graduated on-time (i.e., in four years) along with their socio-demographic characteristics.

TABLE 1: Graduation Rates of Students Categorized by Socio-demographic Characteristics

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	GRADUATION RATE
Foster	42%
Female	81.72%
College & Career Ready	99.99%
Homeless	63.91%
Migrant	85.96%
Black	76.12%
Hispanic	78.89%
White	90.6%
Sed (low-income)	78.3%
Sped	71.81%

Graduation rates in San Diego County show significant variation across demographic groups, underscoring disparities in educational outcomes. While the overall four-year graduation rate is 86%, there are stark differences between student populations. Students meeting a-g requirements graduate at the highest rate (99%), while foster youth graduate at the lowest rate (42%). Black and Hispanic students also graduate at rates well below the county average, with Black students graduating nearly 10% lower and Hispanic students 7% lower than the countywide average. These differences highlight both the challenges some groups face and the successes of others, emphasizing the importance of targeted interventions to better support groups with lower graduation rates.

Most on-track students graduate on-time, while many off-track students rebound at some point in high school

Understanding the percentage of off-track 9th grade students and whether they graduate on time is essential for implementing timely interventions. A student is considered on-track after successfully completing two courses in at least three of the four core subject areas and passing all other classes during their 9th grade year. On-time graduation refers to completing a high school diploma within four years of entering high school.

The chart below compares high school students based on their on- and off-track status, highlighting the differences between those who graduated on time and those who did not.

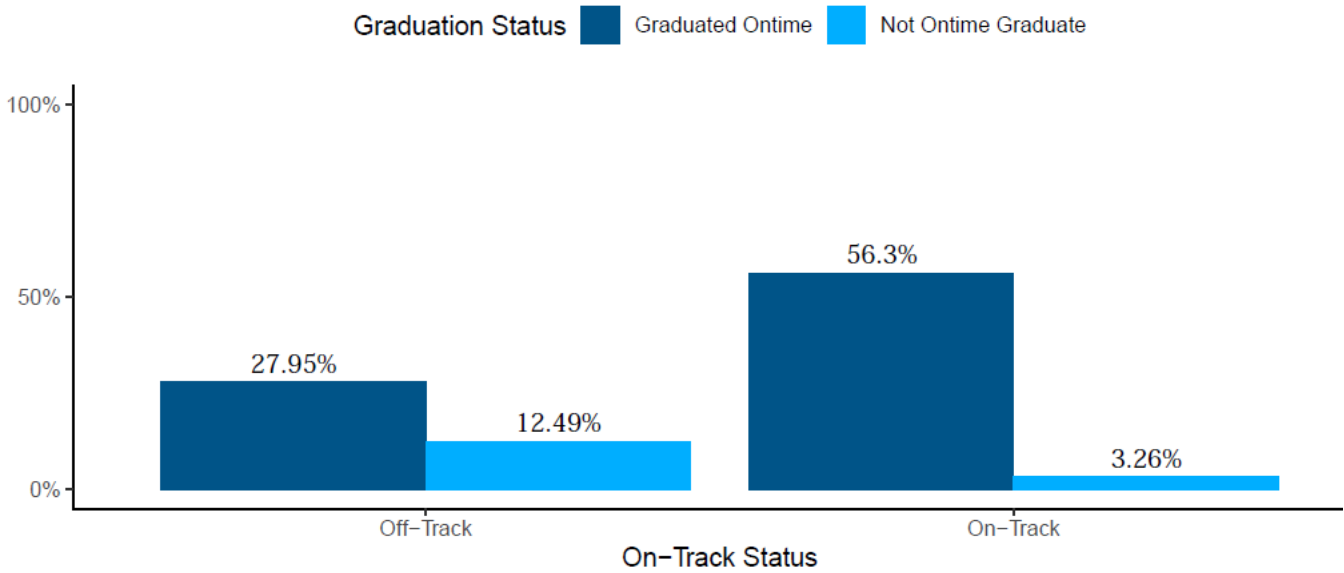


FIGURE 1: High School On-Track and Off-Track Counts by Graduation Status

For off-track students, the chart shows the proportion that managed to graduate on time (27.95%) compared to those who did not (12.49%). Similarly, for on-track students, the chart shows a very high percentage of on-time graduates (56.3%) compared to a small fraction who, despite being on-track, did not graduate on time (3.26%). This chart highlights the effectiveness of being on-track in terms of timely graduation and points to potential areas of concern or focus for those who are off-track, both in terms of interventions needed to improve on-time graduation rates and understanding the barriers that prevent timely graduation even among students who are ostensibly on-track.

To complement the data insights presented in this report, we have included **TRY THIS** sections that outline practical, research-based strategies for addressing specific challenges identified in the findings. These strategies are intended as starting points for testing, adapting, and scaling within various school contexts. While no single approach can fully resolve systemic inequities, these tools are designed to offer actionable pathways for improving student outcomes and creating more equitable learning environments.

TRY THIS

Tutoring Programs

Studies have shown that when implemented correctly, tutoring programs can lead to measurable improvements in student performance. For instance, the “What Works Clearinghouse” guidelines by the U.S. Department of Education highlight that one-on-one or small group tutoring is highly effective in improving academic achievement for students at risk of failure. Implementing such targeted interventions requires careful planning and resources but can be a critical factor in helping students catch up and stay on track for on-time graduation. For further reading and detailed guidelines on how to design and implement effective tutoring programs, you can visit resources such as the What Works Clearinghouse (Texas Education Agency, 2024).

More than 7,100 Black and Hispanic students are off-track for on-time graduation by the end of 9th grade

The table below breaks down high school students’ on- and off-track statuses by race/ethnicity. Each row represents a specific racial or ethnic group, with columns detailing three key metrics: the number and percentage of students who are off-track, the number and percentage of those who are on-track, and the total number of students in each group.

TABLE 2: High School On-Track and Off-Track Counts by Race/Ethnicity

RACE/ETHNICITY	OFF-TRACK	ON-TRACK	TOTAL
American Indian	45 (43.69%)	58 (56.31%)	103 (100.00%)
Asian	339 (18.05%)	1,539 (81.95%)	1,878 (100.00%)
Black	550 (52.83%)	491 (47.17%)	1,041 (100.00%)
Filipino	244 (17.50%)	1,150 (82.50%)	1,394 (100.00%)
Hispanic	6,141 (48.00%)	6,654 (52.00%)	12,795 (100.00%)
Not Reported	30 (30.30%)	69 (69.70%)	99 (100.00%)
Pacific Islander	47 (35.34%)	86 (64.66%)	133 (100.00%)
Two or More Races	363 (27.73%)	946 (72.27%)	1,309 (100.00%)
White	1,744 (22.45%)	6,025 (77.55%)	7,769 (100.00%)

Filipino students have the highest percentage of on-track students at 82.50%, followed closely by Asian students at 81.95%, indicating these groups encounter fewer barriers to staying on track academically. In contrast, Black students have the highest percentage of off-track students at 52.83%, followed by Hispanic students at 48.00%, demonstrating that nearly half or more of these students face significant challenges impacting their academic progress.

Among smaller groups, American Indian students have a 43.69% off-track rate, and Pacific Islander students 35.34%, highlighting notable difficulties in maintaining on-track status. White students, with 77.55% on track, perform better than the overall average across groups, though 22.45% remain off-track, indicating room for improvement.

Smaller groups such as students who did not report their race or ethnicity (30.30% off-track) and those identifying as two or more races (27.73% off-track) show varied outcomes but generally fare better than larger groups like Black or Hispanic students.

As indicated by the table, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students face systemic barriers—such as underfunded schools, implicit bias, and limited access to resources—that hinder their progress toward on-time graduation. These obstacles require intentional and focused efforts to create equitable learning environments and improve educational outcomes for all students. Catalina’s story reflects these numbers. Despite her determination, challenges like overcrowded schools and conflicting schedules pushed her off track. These findings emphasize that without targeted interventions to address these inequities early and comprehensively, students like Catalina will continue to struggle during this pivotal year.

TRY THIS

Learning Partnerships

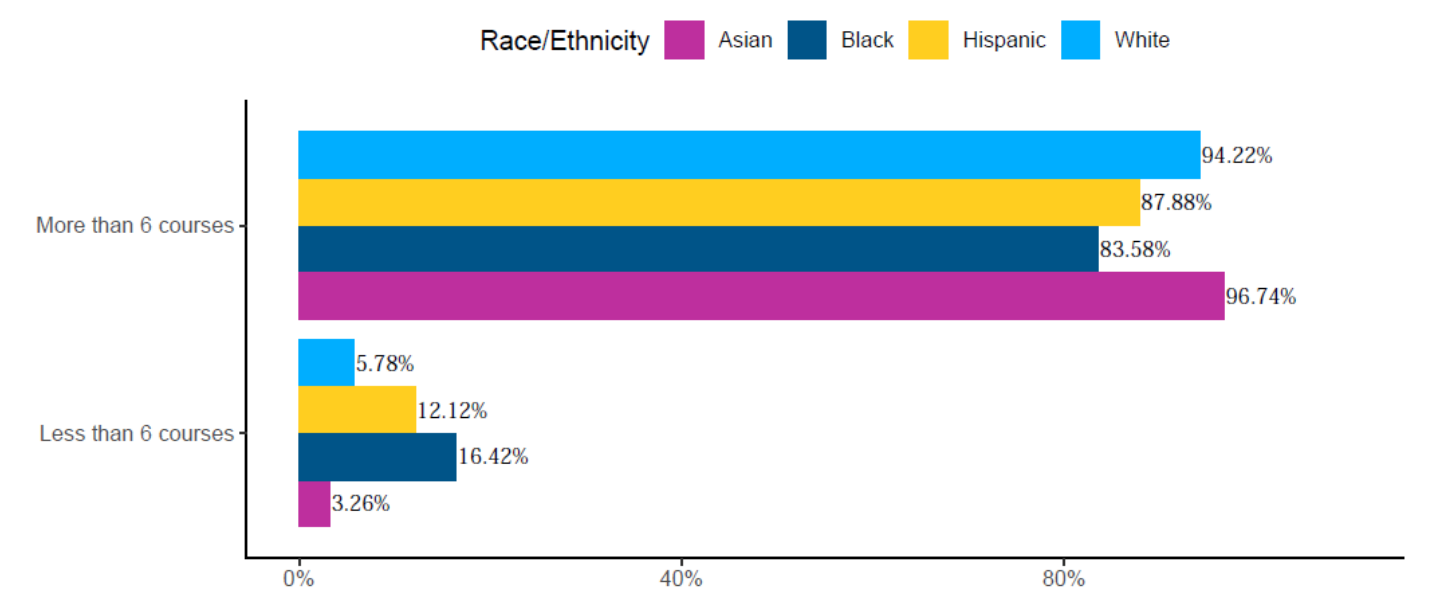
Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) can significantly improve academic outcomes for minority students by fostering engagement and creating a sense of belonging. One actionable CRT strategy is using “learning partnerships,” as outlined in Zaretta Hammond’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015). This practice encourages educators to build authentic relationships with students by affirming their cultural identity and providing emotional support alongside rigorous academic challenges. By recognizing students’ strengths and working collaboratively to bridge knowledge gaps, teachers can create a classroom environment that values diversity as an asset. Implementing strategies like learning partnerships requires thoughtful training and a commitment to systemic change within schools, ensuring administrators, staff, and teachers collectively promote inclusion and equity.



Black students have access to on-track course requirements at a much lower rate than other student groups

Understanding the distribution of credits earned at the end of the 9th grade year is essential for making informed decisions that impact student success, school performance, and educational equity. It allows educational institutions to take proactive measures to support their students and enhance overall educational outcomes.

FIGURE 2: Credits earned in 9th grade by race/ethnicity



The chart shows that the “More than 6 courses” group is the largest, indicating that most students complete the expected number of courses by the end of 9th grade, aligning with expected educational progress. A small subset of students exceed 12 courses (not pictured), reflecting those who are accelerating their academics, engaging in advanced learning opportunities, or participating in quarter systems that allow them to take more than six courses per quarter. In contrast, the “Less than 6 courses” group comprises a much smaller percentage of students, representing those who have not met the standard course completion expectations for 9th grade. These students may experience academic challenges, personal obstacles, or other barriers affecting their ability to stay on track.

Particularly concerning are the disparities within the “Less than 6 courses” group. Black students (16%) and Hispanic students (12%) are over represented in this category, completing fewer courses than their Asian and White peers, who maintain on-track rates of 95% or higher. Addressing the factors that contribute to the disproportionality for these groups is critical to helping them catch up, stay engaged, and reduce the risk of dropping out.

While the majority of students complete six or more courses, meeting standard curriculum requirements for one academic year, the data reveals that only four in five Black students meet this threshold, compared to their Asian and White counterparts, who attain this benchmark at much higher rates.

More than a third of first-time 9th grade students fail a class

Tracking Ds and Fs enables schools to foster a more supportive and adaptable educational environment that addresses students’ individual needs and maximizes their opportunities for success. Low grades often signal that a student is struggling with the course material, lacks essential study skills, or is facing external challenges such as personal or family issues that impact academic performance. Effective interventions can keep students on track to graduate, ensuring they remain engaged and capable of achieving their academic goals.

TABLE 3: Frequency of Ds and Fs in 9th grade

D/F	COUNT	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
0	24,144		65.53
1	3,575		9.70
2	2,442		6.63
3	1,688		4.58
4	1,311		3.56
5	1,035		2.81
6+	2,652		7.20

This table reveals that nearly two-thirds of students (65.53%) successfully pass all their classes during their 9th grade year. However, this leaves about 34.48% of students who fail one or more classes. The categories in this table are mutually exclusive, meaning a student with one D or F is not included in the categories for two or more Ds or Fs. As the number of Ds or Fs increases, the number of students in these categories decreases, indicating that it is less common for students to accumulate multiple failing grades—except in the “more than 6” category.

Hispanic students are nearly four times more likely to fail courses compared to White students

The chart below illustrates the percentages of students failing classes by race and ethnicity.

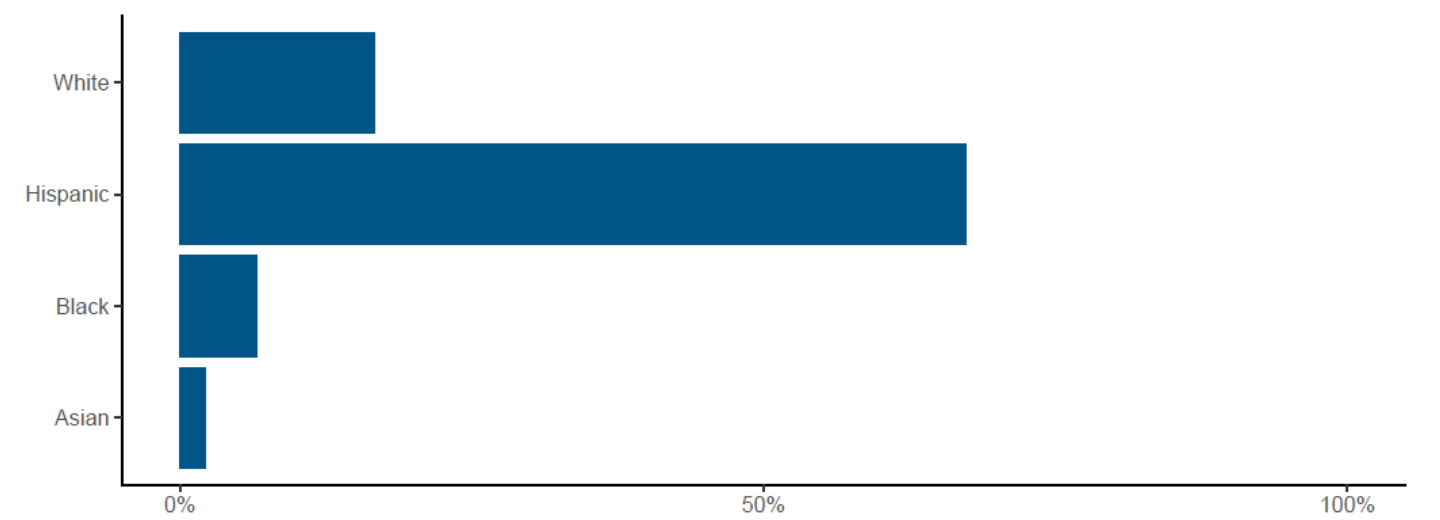


Figure 3: Percent of 9th grade students failing classes by race/ethnicity

Hispanic students have the highest course failure rate (67%), far exceeding rates among other racial/ethnic groups, including White students (17%), Black students (7%), and Asian students (2%). These stark disparities highlight systemic inequities that demand urgent action to provide equitable educational opportunities. The disproportionately high failure rates among Hispanic students point to potential issues such as gaps in curriculum design, ineffective teaching strategies, or insufficient access to academic resources. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that ensures all students have the support and opportunities necessary to succeed.

TRY THIS
Equitable Grading Practices

Grading for equity involves assessing students in a way that is fair and inclusive, aiming to accurately reflect their understanding and mastery of content without bias from factors unrelated to learning outcomes. This approach often includes practices like using a growth mindset to acknowledge progress, allowing revisions on assignments, and basing grades on demonstrated knowledge rather than behaviors or external factors. For more detailed guidelines and strategies on how to implement equitable grading practices, Joe Feldman’s book *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* is a comprehensive resource (2018).

Upon closer examination of countywide failure rates, many students struggle with their first year math class, English, and science courses.

TABLE 4: Count of 9th grade classes failed by course name

COURSE NUMBER	FAILED COURSES
Integrated Mathematics I	6,907
English 9	5,555
Biology	3,120
High School Physical Education I	2,794
Algebra I (one year course)	2,098
Spanish (first and second year)	1,799
World Regional Geography	1,273
Earth Science	853
AVID	715

The table highlights the courses with the highest number of 9th grade failures, with Integrated Mathematics I leading at 6,907 failed classes, followed by English 9 with 5,555 failures, indicating these as the most challenging subjects for students. Other notable courses with significant failures include Biology (3,120), High School Physical Education I (2,794), and Algebra I (2,098). In contrast, courses like Earth Science (853) and AVID (715) have the fewest failures. These trends point to mathematics and English as areas requiring the most attention, possibly through enhanced support mechanisms such as high-impact tutoring or curriculum adjustments to improve student outcomes in these critical subjects.

For Catalina, failing her first math test was a turning point. Her inability to access after-school tutoring due to her bus schedule serves as a reminder that failing grades often reflect barriers beyond the classroom—like transportation and limited resources—not a lack of effort or ability.

About two-thirds of first-time 9th grade students are on track for an on-time graduation

To better understand off-track status, we categorized 9th grade students into five distinct groups based on the criteria outlined in the chart below. The chart categorizes 9th grade students based on their degree of being on-track or off-track academically, defined by the completion of subject area classes with a grade of C or better. The categories range from “Securely On-Track,” which requires completion of all four core subject areas (English, math, science, and social studies), to “Far Off-Track,” where students fail to complete any subject area classes.

TABLE 5: High School On-Track and Off-Track Counts by Race/Ethnicity

DEGREE OF ON- OR OFF-TRACK	DEFINITION	# OF STUDENTS	% OF STUDENTS
Securely On-Track	Completed four subject area classes (Eng, math, science, and social studies) with a C or better and passed all classes.	6,798	21.99%
Marginally On-Track	Completed three subject area classes (Eng, math, and either science or social studies) with a C or better and passed all classes.	11,610	37.56%
Marginally Off-Track	Completed two subject area classes (Eng and 1 other subject area) with a C or better.	6,001	19.42%
Moderately Off-Track	Completed one subject area class (any subject area class) with a C or better.	5,800	18.77%
Far Off-Track	Completed no subject area classes.	699	2.26%

On-track status represents two groups. Securely On-Track students make up 21.99% of the population (6,798 students), indicating that only about one-fifth of students are excelling across all core subjects. The largest group, Marginally On-Track, consists of 11,610 students (37.56%), who completed three subject areas successfully. This suggests that many students are close to the highest on-track status but fall short in one subject.

We divided off-track status into three groups. Marginally Off-Track (6,001 students, 19.42%) and Moderately Off-Track (5,800 students, 18.77%) together represent a significant portion (38.19%), highlighting areas where students are struggling with completing sufficient core subjects. The smallest group, Far Off-Track, includes 699 students (2.26%), indicating a minority who are severely behind in their academic progress.

These data illustrate the varying levels of academic preparedness among 9th grade students. The significant proportion of students in the “Marginally On-Track” category suggests that targeted interventions in one subject area could help many students achieve full on-track status. Additionally, the combined 38.19% of students who are “Marginally Off-Track” or “Moderately Off-Track” points to a need for broader support mechanisms, possibly through high impact tutoring or resource allocation to help students improve across multiple subjects. The “Far Off-Track” group, while small, requires special attention to address foundational gaps in their education. Overall, these trends underscore the importance of early identification and support to keep students on the path to academic success.

The farther off track a student is, the lower the chances of an on-time graduation

Below, the chart illustrates the combination of on- and off-track degrees or levels with on and not on-time graduation. Each cell in the “Not Ontime Graduate” and “Graduated Ontime” columns includes both the count of students and their respective percentages of the total student body, illustrating the relationship between students’ track status and their likelihood of graduating on time.

TABLE 6: On-Time Graduation Rates by On/Off-Track Degree

DEGREE ON/OFF-TRACK	NOT ONTIME GRADUATE	GRADUATED ONTIME	TOTAL
Far Off-Track	367 (7.54%)	332 (1.27%)	699 (2.26%)
Moderately Off-Track	2,168 (44.54%)	3,632 (13.95%)	5,800 (18.77%)
Marginally Off-Track	1,325 (27.22%)	4,676 (17.96%)	6,001 (19.42%)
Marginally On-Track	653 (13.42%)	10,957 (42.08%)	11,610 (37.56%)
Securely On-Track	354 (7.27%)	6,444 (24.75%)	6,798 (21.99%)

Students who are more “on-track” (either “Marginally On-Track” or “Securely On-Track”) have significantly higher percentages of on-time graduation (42.08% and 24.75% respectively). This suggests that as students maintain or exceed their academic and course completion milestones, their likelihood of graduating on time improves substantially.

A large portion of students categorized as “Far Off-Track” or “Moderately Off-Track” do not graduate on time, constituting 7.54% and 44.54% of the not on-time graduates, respectively. These categories also have markedly lower percentages of on-time graduates (1.27% and 13.95%, respectively), indicating that falling behind significantly jeopardizes timely graduation.

The categories “Marginally On-Track” and “Securely On-Track” together account for nearly 60% of the total student population, which is a positive indicator of general student progress toward graduation. The data suggest a need for interventions and support for students who are off-track, particularly those who are “Moderately” and “Far Off-Track.” Programs aimed at addressing the specific challenges faced by these students could potentially increase on-time graduation rates.

TRY THIS
Early Warning System

Research from organizations like the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University demonstrates that EWS can significantly reduce dropout rates and improve student outcomes by facilitating early and tailored interventions. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education recommends the use of EWS as part of their dropout prevention strategies, highlighting its effectiveness in keeping students on track. Implementing an Early Warning System can be particularly beneficial in addressing the disparities seen among Black and Hispanic students in the “Less than 6 courses” category. By providing these students with timely and appropriate supports, schools can help mitigate the effects of various barriers to academic success and promote equity within their student populations. For more detailed insights and practical guidelines on setting up and maintaining an Early Warning System, you can refer to resources like the National High School Center’s Early Warning System Implementation Guide, which provides comprehensive guidance on implementing these systems effectively (National High School Center, 2008).

By further analyzing graduation rates by race/ethnicity across on- and off-track categories, several notable trends become apparent. Specifically, in the Asian demographic, students categorized as on-track show a graduation rate near 98%, significantly outperforming their off-track counterparts, who graduate at about 84%. However, this gap underscores the impact of graduating on time within this group. That is to say, most complete high school on time despite their on-track status in 9th grade.

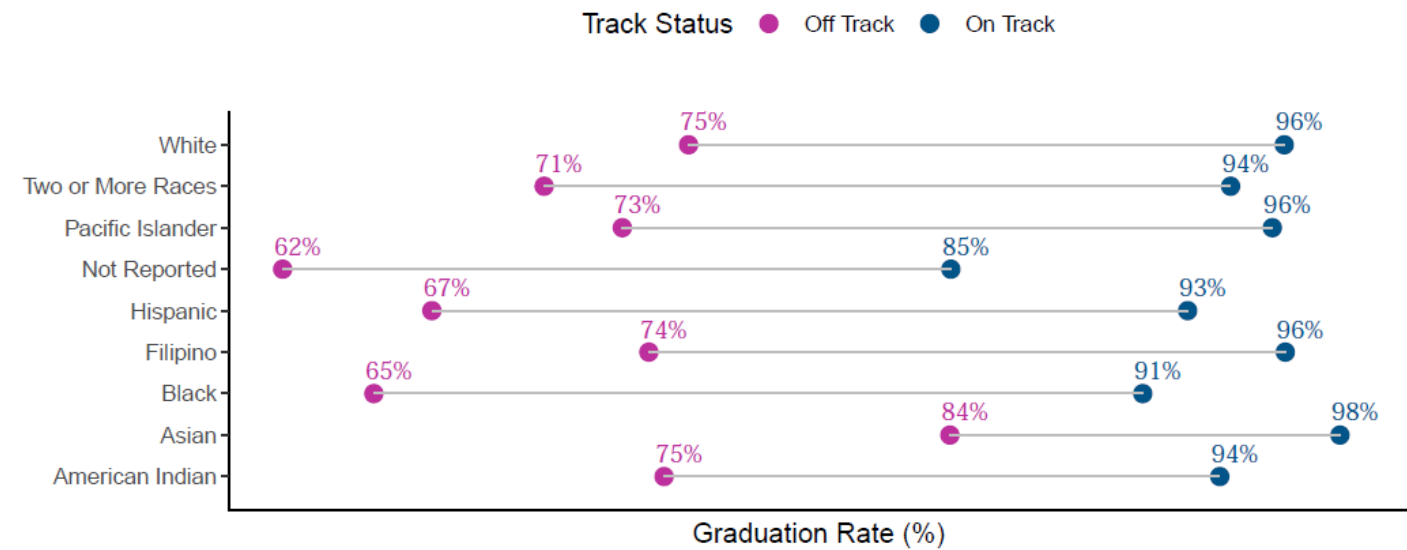


Figure 4: On-Time Graduation Rates by On-Off-Track Degree

In contrast, Black students exhibit the widest gap among the racial groups analyzed: off-track students graduate at only 65%, while those who are on track achieve a 91% graduation rate. This 26% gap highlights a pronounced challenge faced by off-track Black students, who not only fall below their on-track peers but also lag significantly behind off-track students in other racial categories. For instance, off-track Asian students graduate at a rate comparable to the county average of 85%, whereas off-track Black students graduate 20% below this benchmark.

These disparities suggest that the consequences of being off track are more dire for Black, Hispanic, and unreported groups. Overall, the data clearly highlight the importance of maintaining on-track status for on-time graduation and the need for schools to focus resources on students who are at risk of falling behind.



Marginally off-track students typically fail classes, many lack access to core subjects

To explore the factors influencing students’ off-track status, particularly those who are marginally off-track, we focused on identifying specific subject areas where these students fell short. Additionally, we assessed how failing classes contributed to their off-track designation. The table below shows the reasons (or percentages of the reasons) why Marginally Off-Track students are off-track, which includes failing classes and/or not having access to core subject courses.

TABLE 7: Marginally Off-Track Students by Missing Criteria

STUDENTS MISSING ON-TRACK CRITERIA	GRADUATION RATE	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	PERCENT OF MARGINALLY OFF-TRACK STUDENTS
Math	79.33%	2,111	35.17%
Science	79.6%	3,217	53.58%
Social Studies	77.8%	4,199	69.84%
Failed Classes	74.42%	4,546	75.72%

A significant portion of Marginally Off-Track students, specifically 75.72%, fail classes, which is a major factor that directly affects their ability to graduate on time. Additionally, access to core academic subjects is disproportionately limited for these students: 69.84% have no access to social studies, 53.58% to science, and only 35.17% have access to math classes. This disparity raises crucial systemic questions about educational equity such as: *Who determines which students gain access to these essential courses? How does this restricted access impact their chances of graduating on time?* Moreover, it is important to investigate which students are provided the opportunity to enroll in all four core subject areas and which are excluded. These questions are essential for addressing the underlying issues that prevent Marginally Off-Track students from achieving their educational goals. We provide additional questions and opportunities to explore these types of issues in the next section of the report.

Essentially, students categorized as Marginally Off-Track may receive this designation for a variety of reasons. Some may not be enrolled in the minimum required three subject-area classes, while others fall off track due to failing their courses. In many cases, students face a combination of both issues. These varied circumstances underscore the need to understand the specific reasons behind each student’s off-track status and to develop tailored interventions that address their unique challenges. Whether it involves ensuring appropriate course enrollment or offering targeted academic support to improve performance, each situation demands a strategic and individualized approach. By implementing these focused strategies, schools can provide the necessary resources to help students regain their footing and move toward on-time graduation.

Securely on-track status distributed evenly across race and ethnicity

Below, the chart illustrates the percentage of students from various racial and ethnic groups who are securely on track to graduate on time. Securely on track means that students have met all the criteria for on-time graduation, including earning sufficient credits and passing all required courses during their 9th grade year.

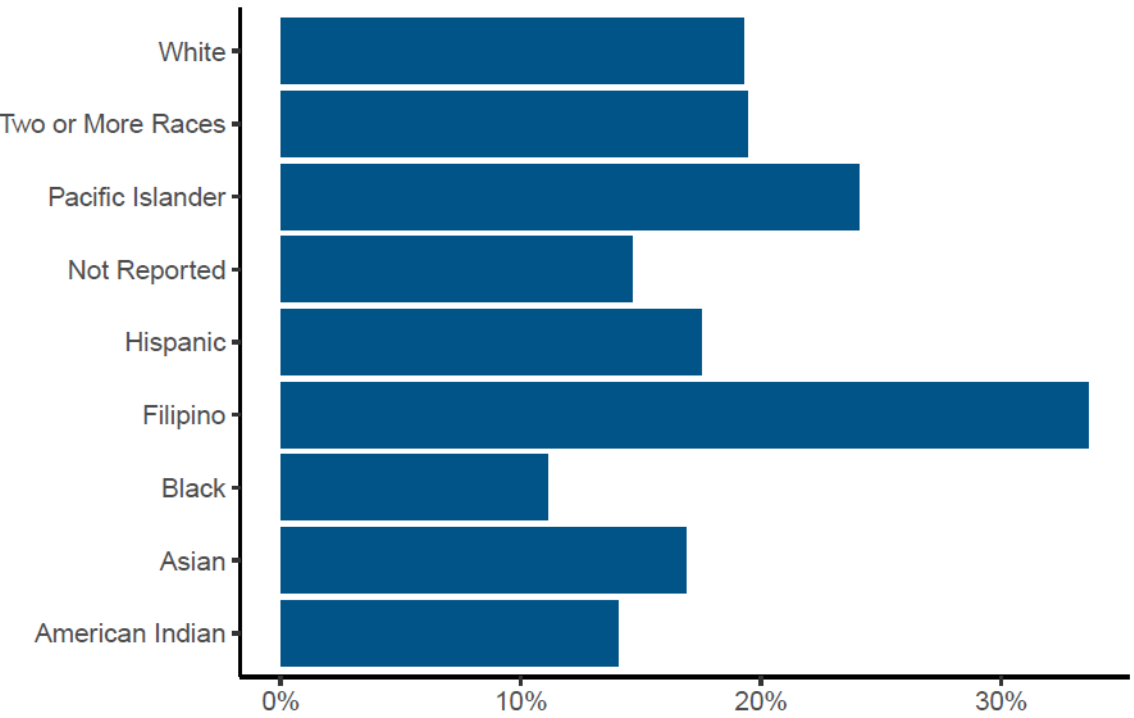


FIGURE 5: Secure On-Track by Race/Ethnicity

The data in this chart reveal that the percentages of students meeting the criteria for being securely on track are relatively well-balanced across racial and ethnic groups. While there are some differences, these discrepancies are relatively minor, suggesting that the securely on-track category is less impacted by systemic biases or disproportionalities. Groups such as Filipino and Asian students show slightly higher percentages, reflecting strong academic outcomes, but other groups, including Hispanic, White, and students identified as “Not Reported” or “Two or More Races,” are not far behind. Even groups with historically lower outcomes, such as Black, Pacific Islander, and American Indian students, have a notable presence in the securely on-track category, indicating that these benchmarks are broadly achievable across demographics.

While these results are encouraging and highlight the potential for equitable academic outcomes across diverse student groups, it is important to recognize that significant challenges remain. For many students, particularly those who are not securely on-track, the path to postsecondary success is far more precarious. These challenges become especially evident when examining the on- or off-track progress and its impact on long-term goals such as college enrollment.

For one-fourth of 9th grade students, college enrollment may feel unattainable by the end of the 9th grade year

This table outlines college enrollment status among students based on their level of on- or off-track progress toward graduation. Each row represents a specific category of on- or off-track status, showing the number and percentage of students who either enrolled in college or did not enroll.

TABLE 8: College Enrollment Rates by On-Off-Track Degree

DEGREE ON/OFF-TRACK	NOT COLLEGE ENROLLED	COLLEGE ENROLLED	TOTAL
Far Off-Track	136 (2.31%)	215 (1.04%)	351 (1.32%)
Moderately Off-Track	1,531 (25.96%)	2,511 (12.18%)	4,042 (15.24%)
Marginally Off-Track	1,828 (31.00%)	3,282 (15.91%)	5,110 (19.27%)
Marginally On-Track	1,487 (25.22%)	9,119 (44.22%)	10,606 (39.99%)
Securely On-Track	915 (15.52%)	5,497 (26.65%)	6,412 (24.18%)

Only a small percentage of “Far Off-Track” students enroll in college (1.04% of the total), while a larger percentage are not enrolled (2.31%), illustrating that students in this category are less likely to pursue higher education. In comparison, “Moderately Off-Track” students have a higher college enrollment rate (12.18%), though a significant proportion (25.96%) still do not enroll, suggesting some improvement but highlighting the continued need for intervention.

The “Marginally On-Track” group sees a much higher college enrollment rate (44.22%) compared to those not enrolled (25.22%), emphasizing how even a marginally on-track status significantly boosts the likelihood of college enrollment. Finally, the “Securely On-Track” group achieves the highest percentage of college enrollment (26.65%) among all categories, clearly demonstrating a strong correlation between being securely ontrack and successfully transitioning to higher education.

TRY THIS

Enhanced Counseling and Advising Practices

By the time Catalina fell far off track, college felt out of reach, illustrating the long-term consequences of failing to intervene early and provide the support students need to stay on a path toward graduation and post-secondary success. These data underscore the profound impact of track status on students’ educational pathways. Being on track—even marginally—greatly enhances the likelihood of college enrollment, highlighting the critical importance of timely interventions for off-track students. These insights provide essential guidance for schools and policymakers to develop targeted support strategies that help students like Catalina improve their outcomes and expand access to higher education opportunities.

Effective counseling is crucial for promoting college access and academic success. Personalized advising helps students navigate academic requirements, identify opportunities, and address enrollment barriers. Research from NACAC shows that students receiving comprehensive advising are more likely to enroll in college and take rigorous courses.

Schools can improve advising by reducing counselor-to-student ratios, training counselors to use data-driven strategies, and adopting tools like career readiness software to personalize guidance. Proactive advising, starting in 9th grade, helps students set goals and plan for college through one-on-one meetings, workshops, and tailored resources.

Additionally, culturally responsive advising is essential for supporting marginalized groups, such as Hispanic and Black students, by addressing unique challenges and connecting them with resources like scholarships. By implementing these strategies, schools can better support students’ paths to higher education. Organizations like NACAC and ASCA offer tools and resources for improving advising systems (American School Counselor Association, n.d.; National Association for College Admission Counseling, n.d.).



WHAT DID WE LEARN EXAMINING THE DATA ANALYTICALLY?

To dig deeper into the disparities in graduation and college enrollment rates, we used an advanced statistical approach that allowed us to analyze multiple factors at once (see the “Supplemental Material” section at the end of the report for information on our methods). Think of it as peeling back the layers of an onion to understand how student and school characteristics shape outcomes. We looked at key student-level factors like race, gender, special education needs, English learner status, and family income. On the school side, we considered things like enrollment size, location, and other details that could influence success rates.

Using specialized software, we adjusted for all these variables to figure out how each one impacts the odds of graduating on time or enrolling in college. This approach helped us untangle the complex web of influences, giving us a clearer picture of what is really driving these disparities—and what schools can do to close the gaps.

Results of Our Analytical Model

This summary from our model (see Supplemental Materials) shows how various factors influence the likelihood of high school students graduating on-time. Our results are expressed in terms of “log-odds,” which measure how the presence or change in these factors increase or decrease the likelihood of graduation.

To elaborate, a log-odds is a way of expressing probabilities. The value of log-odds can be positive or negative. A positive log-odds value means that the factor increases the likelihood of graduating on-time. The higher the value, the stronger the effect. A negative log-odds value means

that the factor decreases the likelihood of graduating on-time. The lower the value, the stronger the negative impact. For example, an Intercept (log-odds = -1.44) in this context suggests that, before considering any other factors, the baseline likelihood of graduating on-time is low. In simpler terms, if none of the other factors were considered, students would generally be less likely to graduate on-time.

Key Findings from the Model

WHAT ARE SEVERAL THINGS THAT MATTER IN TERMS OF GRADUATING ON-TIME?

1. Males are less likely than females to graduate on time, with a lower log-odds value (Male, -0.18). This suggests that males would benefit more from targeted interventions aimed at improving on-time graduation rates.
2. Black students have a slightly reduced likelihood of graduating on time compared to other racial groups (Black, -0.19), while Hispanic students show a modestly higher likelihood (Hispanic, 0.10). This indicates that additional support for Black students may be essential to help ensure they graduate on time.
3. Students in special education programs and English learners face significantly greater challenges in graduating on time, as reflected by their highly negative log-odds (SPED_yes, -0.30; EL_yes, -0.44). These groups represent some of the most at-risk populations and should be prioritized for on-time graduation interventions.
4. A higher GPA has a substantial positive impact on the likelihood of graduating on time (HS_GPA, 1.34). This finding underscores the importance of monitoring and supporting GPA as a critical factor influencing on-time graduation.
5. Being Hispanic and off-track is associated with a higher likelihood of graduating on time compared to other off-track groups (hispanic:hs_offtrack, 0.34). While this may seem counterintuitive, it likely reflects the resilience and determination many Hispanic students exhibit in overcoming challenges to transition from an off-track status to on-track.

However, this pattern is less evident for Black students in the analysis, indicating that schools should prioritize fostering motivation and providing tailored support to help Black students navigate similar transitions and achieve on-time graduation.

6. Students who are academically on track by the end of 9th grade have a much higher probability of graduating on time (hs_ontrack, 0.52). This highlights the importance of identifying and addressing off-track students early, as keeping students on track is a strong predictor of timely graduation and a crucial area of focus for schools aiming to improve graduation outcomes.

OTHER SCHOOL-LEVEL FACTORS

A higher school-wide chronic absenteeism rate significantly reduces the likelihood of students graduating on time (Chronic Absenteeism, -0.94). This indicates that efforts to lower chronic absenteeism rates at the school level can lead to improved on-time graduation outcomes.

In contrast, other factors such as the school’s urban setting, enrollment size, percentage of teachers with clear credentials, school-wide suspension rate, and the availability of advanced placement (AP) courses show minimal impact and are not statistically significant in this analysis. These variables, while important for overall school performance, appear less critical for predicting on-time graduation rates in this context.

Other school-level factors, such as the level of school segregation (segregation_share, 0.96) and the Healthy Places Index score (hpi2_pctile_pos, 0.47), are positively associated with higher on-time graduation rates. A higher score on the segregation index indicates that a school’s racial makeup is more distinct from the district average, suggesting a more segregated environment. According to our model, schools that are more segregated relative to their district tend to exhibit higher on-time graduation rates.

However, this finding should be interpreted with caution. The positive relationship between segregation and on-time graduation rates does not imply that segregation directly improves educational outcomes. Instead, it may reflect underlying factors associated with segregated schools, such as greater alignment of resources or community support with the needs of the student body. Schools with less diversity might have

more homogeneous populations that could, for instance, enable one-size fits all interventions or reduce cultural mismatches between students and staff.

Nonetheless, promoting school segregation is not a solution for improving on-time graduation rates. Research consistently underscores the long-term benefits of diversity in education, such as fostering inclusion, narrowing achievement gaps, and preparing students for participation in diverse societies (Gurin et al., 2002). Instead, addressing the cultural mismatch that Black and Hispanic students may face in racially diverse or predominantly white schools could be more effectively achieved by enhancing the recruitment and retention of teachers of color (Ingersoll & May, 2011).

Similarly, the Healthy Places Index (HPI) score is a comprehensive measure that reflects a community’s overall health and well-being by evaluating various determinants, including socioeconomic status, education, housing quality, access to healthcare, environmental conditions, and more. The index assigns a percentile ranking that indicates how a community compares to others within a broader region, such as a state, across these factors.

In our model, the variable *hpi2_pctile_pos* represents the community’s health and well-being based on these determinants. A higher percentile value indicates that the community performs better in terms of supportive environments for health compared to other communities. The significant positive coefficient for *hpi2_pctile_pos* suggests that communities with higher Healthy Places Index rankings are associated with higher on-time graduation rates. This relationship implies that healthier, resource-rich environments may provide students with more stability and support, fostering conditions that enhance academic success and increase the likelihood of graduating on time.



ASK YOURSELF, TAKE ACTION: ENSURING HISPANIC AND BLACK STUDENTS ON-TRACK FOR ON-TIME GRADUATION

ASK YOURSELF

1. Are we identifying students who are at risk of falling off track early enough?
 - How effectively do our current systems pinpoint struggling 9th grade students, particularly Hispanic and Black students?
 - Are the warning signs of being off-track (e.g., low credit accumulation, failing grades) clearly defined and monitored?
2. What barriers prevent Hispanic and Black students from staying on track?
 - Are these barriers rooted in academic preparedness, access to resources, or systemic inequities?
 - How are school resources allocated to address these challenges?
3. Do our intervention strategies effectively support off-track students?
 - Are programs such as tutoring, mentoring, and credit recovery accessible and effective for Hispanic and Black students?
 - Are cultural and language needs adequately addressed in our interventions?

4. Are all 9th grade students given equitable access to core academic courses?
 - How do course enrollment patterns differ for Hispanic and Black students compared to their peers?
 - Are there systemic practices that limit access to foundational courses?

TAKE ACTION: PROACTIVELY ADDRESSING 9TH GRADE CHALLENGES

ENSURE EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

- Implement real-time data tracking systems to monitor course performance, credit accumulation, and attendance.
- Develop and use early-warning indicators tailored to Hispanic and Black students' unique needs.
- Train staff to recognize non-academic barriers, such as language challenges or socioeconomic pressures.

EXPAND TARGETED INTERVENTIONS FOR OFF-TRACK STUDENTS

- Increase availability of credit recovery programs, including flexible options like summer school or evening courses.
- Partner students with culturally responsive mentors or tutors to provide both academic and emotional support.
- Strengthen connections with families to collaboratively address barriers impacting academic progress.

PROVIDE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO CORE COURSES

- Audit course enrollment practices to identify disparities in access to essential 9th grade courses.
- Ensure all students, especially Hispanic and Black students, have access to advanced and foundational courses.
- Offer additional support for students transitioning into challenging courses, such as math and science.

FOSTER A SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

- Train teachers and staff in culturally responsive teaching practices to ensure inclusivity and understanding.
- Develop peer-led programs where older students mentor 9th graders, focusing on navigating high school successfully.
- Create spaces for Hispanic and Black students to share feedback and co-develop solutions to their challenges.

By embedding these reflective questions and actionable steps into school and district practices, we can better support Hispanic and Black students in overcoming barriers, staying on track, and achieving on-time graduation.



STUDY METHODS

What Questions Did this Study Answer, How, and With Whom?

This study sought to provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers by investigating:

- 1. On-Time Graduation Rates: What percentage of off-track 9th grade students graduate on time and enroll in college?Credit Distributions: How do credit distributions at the end of 9th grade differ, and what percentage of students earn multiple Ds or Fs?
- 2. Student Characteristics: How do graduation rates vary by characteristics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and prior academic performance?
- 3. Levels of On-Track/Off-Track Status: How do graduation rates differ among students who are securely on-track, marginally on-track, or various degrees of off-track?

Significance of the Study

Our research aimed to illuminate the early indicators of student success and identify effective strategies for keeping 9th grade students on track. By focusing on Hispanic and Black students, the study acknowledges and addresses the systemic barriers these groups face, creating an opportunity to design more equitable educational interventions.

Key outcomes of this study included:

- Actionable Data: Schools can leverage findings to implement early-warning systems and tailored support programs.
- Efficient Resource Allocation: By identifying when and how students fall off track, schools can optimize interventions to maximize their impact.
- Promoting Equity: Understanding the unique challenges faced by different student groups

allows educators to craft culturally responsive strategies that close achievement gaps.

- Broader Societal Benefits: Increasing the number of on-time graduates ready for college and careers contributes to economic growth, reduced inequality, and stronger communities.

Our research not only sought to inform practice but also to empower educators with the tools they need to ensure all students have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Who Participated in this Study?

We examined 9th grade on track and on-time graduation rates for first-time 9th grade students who remained enrolled in high school for four years. The study included approximately 37,000 students from 94 urban, rural, and suburban public and charter high schools who first enrolled in high school in the 2015-16 school year.

We examined patterns within these on-track and on-time graduation rates by investigating socio-demographic characteristics in addition to root causes of off track performance including credit accumulation, course access, and other factors.

The table below shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the students involved in the study. More than half of the students in the class of 2016 are female and nearly half met the a-g requirements necessary to attend a UC/CSU. Additionally, more than half the students are low-income (Sed), while about 50% were Hispanic and 5% Black. Approximately 12% of students have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and are labeled “Sped” and 3% of students are unhoused.

TABLE 9: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Students from the Class of 2016

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Foster	101	0.27%
Female	19,026	51.64%
College & Career Ready	16,386	44.47%
Homeless	1,136	3.08%
Migrant	221	0.6%
Black	1,791	4.86%
Hispanic	18,354	49.81%
White	19,456	52.8%
Sed	4,499	12.21%
Sped	Sped	71.81%

To be eligible for the study, students had to be enrolled in the school district for the entire academic year in 2015-2016 as a first-time 9th grade student and continuously enrolled through 2018-2019. Students withdrawing from school altogether or moving out of the school district were excluded.

How Did We Arrive at Our Key Results, and How Did We Account for Differences Between Student Groups to Ensure Fair Comparisons?

Our main focus examined whether students graduated from high school on time, defined as earning their diploma within four years of starting 9th grade. For this study, we tracked first-time 9th grade students who began high school in the 2015-16 school year and graduated by the end of the 2018-19 school year. Additionally, we examined two other key outcomes: whether students graduated prepared for college and careers, using criteria established by the California Department of Education (California Department of Education, 2023), and whether students enrolled in college immediately after graduation. We defined immediate college enrollment as entering

college within six months of graduating high school.

In the most advanced phase of our analysis, we accounted for student demographics—including gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English learner status, and special education status—as well as school-level factors—to predict on-time graduation. This approach allowed us to explore how these contextual variables influence a student’s on-time graduation, providing a more nuanced understanding of the factors that either mitigate challenges or enhance progress toward academic success.

We also explored the 9th grade on-track variable by subdividing it into five categories. This approach provided a more sophisticated analysis of the degree to which a student met the on-track criteria by the end of the 9th grade year. This on- and off-track measure included five degrees: Securely on-track, marginally on-track, marginally off-track, moderately off-track, and far off-track vary.

Securely on-track characterized a student who earned two credits in each of the four content area classes—English, math, science, and social studies, and passed all other classes. Marginally on-track represented a student who earned two credits in three of the four content area classes and passed all other classes. A marginally off-track student earned two credits in two of the four content area classes, and may or may not have passed all other classes. Moderately off-track describes a student who earned only two credits in the four content area classes (and may or may not have passed other classes). And finally, a far off-track student is a student who earned no credits in the four content area classes and may have failed other classes.

In addition to the on- and off-track degree, we created a binary on- and off-track indicator by combining the top two or bottom three degrees. By categorizing students into five categories educators and administrators can gain a clearer picture of the varying degrees to which students are meeting essential academic benchmarks in their first year of high school.

CONCLUSION

This report underscores the critical importance of supporting Hispanic and Black 9th grade students to ensure they remain on track for on-time high school graduation and are prepared for college and career opportunities. The 9th grade year serves as a pivotal point in a student’s academic journey, and falling off track at this stage can have far-reaching consequences. Hispanic and Black students disproportionately face systemic inequities, limited access to resources, and academic barriers that hinder their ability to succeed. This report is ultimately about students like Catalina—bright, capable individuals whose potential is often limited by these systemic challenges. By committing to equity-focused solutions tailored to their needs, we can ensure that no student, like Catalina, is left behind and every student has the opportunity to thrive.

The findings in this report emphasize the importance of early identification and intervention for students who are at risk of falling off track. By implementing targeted strategies such as improved data systems, culturally responsive teaching, equitable access to core courses, and robust family and community engagement, schools can create an environment where all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to thrive. The data also reveal that even marginal improvements in on-track status can lead to significantly better outcomes, such as higher rates of on-time graduation and college enrollment.

As educators, policymakers, and community leaders, we have a shared responsibility to address these disparities and ensure that all students have the support they need to succeed. By prioritizing equity, fostering supportive school environments, and providing the necessary resources and interventions, we can empower Hispanic and Black students to overcome barriers and reach their full potential. The path forward requires collaboration, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to educational equity, but the impact on individual lives and our broader community will be transformative.

Together, we can ensure that every 9th grade student has the tools and support to stay on track, graduate on time, and pursue a future full of possibilities.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations and potential biases that exist in this study, including:

- The study only includes students who remained in high school for four years (and are trackable). This process excludes students who may be at higher risk of dropping out or facing academic challenges, such as those who move frequently due to socioeconomic instability.
- The criteria used to determine “on-track” status (earning two course credits in three of the four core courses and passing all other courses) may not adequately capture the academic and non-academic factors that contribute to student success. This simplistic measure may not reflect the quality of education or engagement levels of students.
- Since the sample is limited to students who have not transferred out of the county/state, the results might not generalize to all 9th graders, especially in urban districts where student mobility can be high.
- While the study intends to control for confounders like socioeconomic status, English learner status, and special education status, other unmeasured confounders such as family support, mental health, peer influence, and teacher effectiveness might influence the outcomes but are not accounted for in the analysis.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Analytical Modeling

MODEL CHECKS

Before analyzing the data, we first reviewed the coefficients and standard errors for each variable to confirm their plausibility based on our understanding of the dataset. We also checked that the dataset met the assumptions required for multilevel modeling. Subsequently, we analyzed the model residuals (the differences between observed values and those estimated by the model) against the predictors to assess linearity, noting that these residuals seemed randomly distributed on the plot.

Additionally, we plotted fitted values against residuals to evaluate the homogeneity of variance across the data. The distribution of data points was relatively even above and below the line, indicating homogeneity within the dataset. We further analyzed the standardized residuals using a QQ plot against normal quantiles to check for normality. Although there was slight deviation from the expected normal line at the upper and lower tails, suggesting potential outliers or skewness at both ends, this deviation was not significant enough to warrant transforming any variables immediately.

Lastly, we conducted a sensitivity analysis using a leverage plot. Although a few observations (specifically, 5) fell outside the typical range (above 50 or below -50), their placement within the data space did not significantly influence the regression line’s shape or position.

MODEL RESULTS

TABLE 10: On-time graduation	
Observations	25966
Dependent variable	ontime_hs_graduation
Type	Mixed effects generalized linear model
Family	binomial
Link	logit

AIC	15337.77
BIC	15501.06
Pseudo-R ² (fixed effects)	0.34
Pseudo-R ² (total)	0.35

FIXED EFFECTS					
	Est.	2.5%	97.5%	z val.	p
(Intercept)	-1.53	-2.25	-0.81	-4.16	0.00
male	-0.18	-0.26	-0.09	-4.11	0.00
black	-0.35	-0.72	0.02	-1.83	0.07
hispanic	-0.11	-0.27	0.06	-1.25	0.21
sped_yes	-0.29	-0.40	-0.18	-5.27	0.00
sed_yes	-0.04	-0.14	0.06	-0.75	0.45
el_yes	-0.44	-0.56	-0.33	-7.39	0.00
hs_gpa	1.04	0.98	1.11	31.42	0.00
hs_ontrack	0.74	0.57	0.91	8.39	0.00
urban	0.17	-0.15	0.49	1.03	0.30
clear_credential_pct	0.70	-0.16	1.56	1.60	0.11
chronic_absenteeism_rate	-0.94	-1.86	-0.02	-2.01	0.04
suspension_rate_total	0.70	-4.71	6.12	0.25	0.80
ap_count_pctile	-0.14	-0.58	0.31	-0.60	0.55
segregation_share	0.94	0.20	1.68	2.49	0.01
cumul_enroll_pctile	0.10	-0.32	0.52	0.46	0.65
hpi2_pctile_pos	0.47	0.03	0.91	2.08	0.04
black:hs_offtrack	0.25	-0.18	0.68	1.15	0.25
hispanic:hs_offtrack	0.34	0.14	0.53	3.38	0.00

RANDOM EFFECTS		
Group Parameter	Std.	Dev.
first_schl_name	(Intercept)	0.29

GROUPING VARIABLES		
Group	# groups	ICC
first_schl_name	66	0.03

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Shannon E. Coulter, Ph.D.

Director, Research and Evaluation

scoulter@sdcoe.net | 858-295-8825

San Diego County Office of Education
6401 Linda Vista Drive, San Diego, CA 92111

