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New research: Students' experiences and school culture matter most for students today, and for their future

And many school quality ratings don't capture these important determinants of student success

A new UChicago Consortium on School Research study released today shines light on what schools can do well to positively affect students' long-term trajectories.

"Our findings strongly suggest the need to take a more holistic view of both adolescents and schools," said Kirabo Jackson, report author and the Abraham Harris Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University. "These findings advance our understanding of how to support student success and prepare students for the future. They also make explicit the disconnect between current metrics for assessing school quality and what high quality schools are actually doing to promote student development."

Researchers found:

1. High schools that fostered 8th to 9th grade student growth across multiple dimensions positively influenced students' social and academic trajectories.

- Researchers called these schools 'effective schools' and measured three dimensions of growth:
 - i. Self-reported socioemotional development, including social well-being (e.g., sense of connectedness to school) and academic effort and work (e.g., engagement, study habits)
 - ii. Test scores (math and English language arts large scale assessments)
 - iii. Behaviors observed by school staff and recorded in administrative data (e.g., attendance, suspensions)

2. Supporting multiple dimensions of student growth had up to *double* the positive impact of fostering only test score growth on:

- 9th grade self-reports socioemotional development, test scores, and observed behaviors
- 11th grade arrests on school grounds
- High school graduation
- Postsecondary enrollment and attendance in year 2

3. Students' long-term trajectories were most strongly influenced by fostering student growth on socioemotional development (high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment/attendance) and behaviors (arrests on school grounds in 11th grade).

- In the short-run, one of the most remarkable findings was that **fostering socioemotional development and fostering test score growth had nearly identical impacts on 9th grade test scores**

4. **High schools that supported students' development on all dimensions of growth were characterized by strong culture and climates.** In particular, effective high schools featured:
- Supportive environments in which students feel safe, supported, and find teachers trustworthy and responsive to their needs
 - Ambitious instruction, such that classes are challenging and engaging, the instruction is clear and well structured and students are encouraged to build on their prior knowledge
 - Collaborative teachers who are active in school improvement efforts, committed to their school, and engaged in professional development activities

“At their core, our findings show that learning is about much more than content,” said Shanette Porter, report author and researcher at the UChicago Consortium on School Research. “Students benefit when they are in schools that challenge them to work hard, productively foster engagement and study skills, and cultivate supportive connections with their peers and teachers. This research doesn’t just show that these things are important—it shows that, actually, they’re the *most* important things schools can do.”

This report’s findings offer notable insights on some of the most-discussed K-12 policies and practices today:

- **Long-run student outcomes:** When schools foster growth on multiple dimensions—socioemotional development, observed behaviors, and large scale assessment scores—students are more likely to thrive in high school and beyond
- **Test scores:** Schools’ impacts on large scale assessment scores from 9th grade mattered for students trajectories; however, schools’ impacts on socioemotional development and behaviors in 9th grade matter substantially more.
- **School climate:** The study’s findings both confirm and expand on other research by demonstrating: 1) the importance of school climate for students’ experiences and trajectories, and 2) that adolescents may be particularly responsive to the combination of a rigorous instructional environment and strong and supportive school-based relationships.
- **School quality metrics:** Effective schools are rigorous and relationship-oriented. This research suggests that school quality measures that exclude high schools’ impacts on SED underestimate or misidentify many impactful schools.
- **Student voice:** What students have to say about their school experiences and their schools’ culture and climate matters greatly. As districts nationwide ask how best to support students’ mental health and involvement in their education, this study shows that student and teacher voices are reliable, valuable, and valid inputs for schools to consider in their school improvement efforts.

Research details: this study asked: **What matters most for students’ short- and long-run trajectories?** Researchers used administrative records (demographics, attendance, and discipline records); *5Essentials* Survey measures of socioemotional development (SED) from 8th and 9th grade students who attended a CPS high school between 2011 and 2017 (160,148 students); and *5Essentials* Survey measures of school climate completed by high school students and teachers.

Additional details about the study can be found in [the full research summary](#), *Investing in Adolescents: High School Climate and Organizational Context Shape Student Development and Educational Attainment* by Shanette C. Porter, C. Kirabo Jackson, Sebastián Kiguel and John Q. Easton, on the UChicago Consortium website.

About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the [UChicago Consortium](#) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenges of school improvement. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

About Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy

[Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy](#) (SESP) is a global force for good. SESP catalyzes change by bringing together a wide range of disciplines— including psychology, economics, computer science, organizational studies, sociology, and education—along with many modes of inquiry. We study individuals, massive organizations and everything in between. This deep, complex, and multifaceted research paves the way for life-changing discoveries.

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