CPS — Center for Postsecondary Success

POLICY BRIEF

Perceptions Matter:

How Schools Can Enhance Underrepresented Students' Resilience on the Rocky Path to College

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ABSTRACT

This policy brief summarizes the results of a three-year mixed methods study examining variation in students' educational pathways. Investigating college-going among a predominantly low-income, underrepresented minority student population, detailed analysis shows distinctions in how students perceive relationships with school faculty and peers, which can serve as a mechanism to sustain their ambitions through the obstacles they encounter in high school and expect in college. Results suggest schools can increase student success by *facilitating social support structures that enhance students' perceptions of value and esteem for their potential*.

How Can School Contexts Sustain College Ambitions among Underrepresented Students?

Schools have attempted to address stratification in black and Latino students' access to higher education through extensive reform initiatives, including those focused on social supports. Crucially, these efforts have not sufficiently focused on how students experience these reforms, which is essential to improving their effectiveness and understanding why they have been insufficient. This case study examines students' postsecondary pathways in a predominantly Latino and low-income urban charter school. Specifically, the study asks: how can the social context of schools keep underrepresented minority students on track to transition to college?

Problem: In the U.S., Inequality Remains Even in the Age of Access

Even in the age of increased access to postsecondary education, disparities remain. The schools attended by underrepresented minority students tend to offer fewer resources and support. The highest quality public schools tend to be located in affluent areas, and private options tend to have a prohibitive price tag and a shrinking number of scholarships given the economic downturns of recent years. Correspondingly, the landscape of school choices has expanded through various reform-oriented efforts at the local, state, and national levels. Many urban students have been redistributed, albeit problematically, into new types of public schools in which minority youth are transitioning to colleges at high rates. These environments present opportunities to examine within-school variation for high-aspiring underrepresented students in less traditionally studied social contexts, among co-ethnic and similarly socioeconomically disadvantaged peers. The degree to which students benefit from these environments may be influenced by their relationships with their schools' teachers, staff, and student peers.

METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed-methods case study design, this three-year study examined students' educational pathways at Santiago, a Chicago charter high school. Data collection methods included ethnographic fieldwork,

interviews, and a longitudinal survey. Supplemental secondary data sources were utilized to contextualize the case study. Interview transcripts and field notes were transcribed and coded to examine variation in students' experience of their social context and their college transition plans. To contextualize these findings, the author utilized descriptive, associative, and logistic regression techniques to analyze quantitative data from the case study survey and corresponding city and national datasets.

FINDINGS

Key Finding #1: Students observe and value support from teachers and peers, embedded within the school's social context. These bonds bordered on the familial. Many students did not have fathers who were involved in their lives, as evidenced in the interviews, survey responses and comments, and ethnographic fieldwork. These and other students described parents' multiple jobs and their own adoption of domestic responsibilities, which middle- and higher-income children tend not to be expected to perform (e.g., afterschool care of younger siblings and older relatives, navigating financial aid paperwork for college applications). Under the guidance of the administration, teachers cultivated

strategies to facilitate these ties, which carried over to the organization of student peer relationships.

Key Finding #2: At the aggregate, the school's highly structured support networks appear to have a positive effect on student's college transition outcomes. Santiago students enrolled in college at more than twice the rate of the most popular neighborhood school by November 1st after their graduation. Comparing Santiago and Magnet School A, Santiago's students are nearly twice as likely to enroll in college outside of the state and two and a half times as likely to enroll in a very selective college. This comparison suggests that the structured support at Santiago could be associated with their students' decisions to go to more selective universities (as opposed to undermatching) and farther from home than their magnet school peers. Nonetheless, Santiago's college placement ranges widely, despite school leaders' and teachers' efforts to organize their school around practices intended to align students' activities and behaviors with their college ambitions. This heterogeneity of outcomes appears related to students' response to setbacks during their high school career, a series of obstacles that may be particularly frequently encountered by disadvantaged and underrepresented minority students.

College Enrollment Data, in Comparison to Most Cited High Schools which Students Would Have Otherwise Attended

College Placement	Santiago	Magnet School A	Neighborhood School B
Number of graduates	91	929	364
Enrolled in college	67.0%	75.6%	30.2%
4 year college	82.0%	80.5%	54.5%
Outside Illinois	18.0%	9.7%	N/A
Full-time	80.3%	80.2%	53.6%
Very Selective	34.0%	14.0%	N/A

Source. National Student Clearinghouse Data, reported by Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development, Office of High School Programs, Chicago Public Schools.

Note. The comparison schools were selected based on their status as the most popular selections for the item: "Where would you have attended had you not gotten into Santiago?" Using analyses of students' survey responses about the school to which they would have attended should they not have won the Santiago entry, the two schools which stood out as the most common second choice schools were designated Magnet School A and Neighborhood School B.

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Key Finding #3: Within this urban "college preparatory" charter school context, students' educational expectations do not explain variation in their transition to college. The supplemental figure available on the CPS site shows the results of a multiple logistic regression analysis predicting students' initial postsecondary enrollment, controlling for 10th grade mathematics level, a measure of academic readiness for college. In this case study of high-aspiring underrepresented students in an academically rigorous high school, something other than expectations influences underrepresented students' transitions to college.

Key finding #4: Nearly all students encountered hurdles threatening to derail their college ambitions. Some respondents reported feeling school adults' and peers' belief in them during these times, and how it helped them remain resilient in the face of their struggles. The extent to which students encountered each of these challenges varied as well, but most students seemed to experience at least one, if not all. Five primary and at times interrelated stressors emerged: academic grades, predicted stereotype threat, family responsibilities, family estrangement, and burnout. Given the increasing intensification of American public schools, in minority communities in particular, the latter two phenomena are comparatively less discussed and likely to be increasingly prevalent among underrepresented students in the climate of school reform; these merit special attention.

Family estrangement. Students' families by definition were supportive of the Santiago experiment when initially enrolling their children in the lottery and for enrollment in their ninth grade year. However, this enthusiasm often waned as the demands on students' time and effort increased, and students' energies became increasingly centered on the school rather than on the family. Sonia Bermudez, an 18-year-old senior whose father was in prison and lived with her mother, younger siblings, and nearby extended family, reported feeling problematically distant from her family during time at Santiago.

It was a breaking point I guess with my family. I guess I lost touch with them. I was always edgy and moody. I guess I had a lot of downfall at home. It reflected in my school work, where I felt like didn't want to do it anymore. And I guess your brain is just like – at a point it says, like, no more.

The quote above demonstrates how these stressors can be interrelated. What may have appeared to be simple academic deficits were associated with Sonia's estrangement from her family as well as general stress and exhaustion. For others, obstacles existed in other configurations.

Burnout. Socioeconomic disadvantage and minority status are associated with health problems like asthma and diabetes, in addition to financial hardships and societal prejudices. Prior stressors were likely exacerbated by the vigorous college-readiness workload, expected extracurricular commitments, and public transport commutes many of them managed. The table available on the CPS site depicts students' self-reported emotional and physical health during the base year of the survey, ranging from "poor" to "excellent." Assuming students tended to overrate rather than underrate their well-being, it seems meaningful that nearly one-fifth of the students who had spent more than one year at Santiago rated themselves as being in low emotional health.

Key finding #5: School regard can enhance students' resilience and persistence. Some students persisted through the transition to college in the face of academic, socioeconomic, and other challenges. Students' resilience was associated with their perceptions of how their teachers' and peers' regarded their capacity for educational success *(school regard)*.

Although many students and school staff evoked the school-as-family metaphor during the study, this school functioned as a community focused on getting kids to college rather than on their

emotional development, for example. As senior Will Vargas described Santiago: "from the first day actually, whatever we do here, it is college prep." He was planning to enroll in a local campus of a popular private, non-selective vocational college with a low track- record for students graduating with a degree. Evelyn Santos serves as another example of a student who felt less connected and valued by school peers. Evelyn determined that her peers in the highest academic track were less empathetic than her neighborhood and lower academic track school peers, perhaps because they were absorbed in the stress of schoolwork. Her more academically focused peers, in her words, looked at her "like [she is] ridiculous." This perceived lack of regard was her primary explanation for her decision to work and attend a community college until her family life becomes more "stable," rather than enroll in a competitive four-year college.

Nevertheless, the majority of Santiago students interviewed cited at least one advocate in the school who they felt believed in them and helped them persevere, whether it was a peer, a teacher or counselor, or a combination of one or more of these. Survey results about students' perceptions of teachers' beliefs about them reinforced this conclusion. Findings show the association between school regard (from teachers) and Santiago students' postsecondary transition outcomes, specifically leaving Santiago before graduation, graduating but not continuing on to college, matriculating in postsecondary institutions, and institutional selectivity. Students who went on to college seemed to have a greater tendency to perceive positive school regard from their teachers. These perceptions have consequences.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School reform efforts need to consider that students are human individuals first. While enhancing rigor and pedagogy alone may be effective for well-resourced students, the non-academic challenges often encountered by underrepresented students can get in the way of their ability to respond to these reforms.

2. Interventions to help students manage stress and achieve a more positive school-life balance may enhance underrepresented students' successful transitions to college.

3. Underrepresented students need school-based allies who think they are intelligent, capable, and worthy of pursuing and realizing their college ambition. Such allies can be a crucial factor in keeping them on their trajectory.

4. Schools should be organized such that students have the opportunity to develop close relationships at school, which can enhance and reinforce their aspirations to go to and graduate from college.

5. Attempts to evaluate school effectiveness may problematically under-emphasize students' interpretation of these reform efforts. This study suggests that students' perceptions of their school context may be a more accurate measure of the efficacy of approaches than a seemingly more objective emphasis on the academic and social reforms organized within the school.