

For Immediate Release

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STRATEGIC DATA PROJECT PROVIDES ADDITIONAL FINDINGS ON COLLEGE-GOING PATTERNS

Research Shows That Many High Achieving High School Students Do Not Attend College

Cambridge, MA. (December 17, 2012) – According to findings released today by researchers at the Strategic Data Project (SDP), as many as 16 percent of the students in SDP partner districts who are high achieving, as indicated by superior grades and SAT scores, do not attend college once they complete high school. In addition, some high-achieving students who do attend college but opt to enroll in less selective postsecondary schools meet with less success than those who choose more selective colleges and universities.

Based at the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, SDP is releasing a set of three Strategic Performance Indicators (SPIs) today that challenge common assumptions about college-going patterns in U.S. school districts and provide deeper insight into the health and performance of school districts. SDP developed these indicators through a series of studies conducted in partnership with eight large urban school systems across the United States.

“Whether it is by looking closely at ninth graders who are struggling academically, tracking where and what happens when students attend college, or by isolating the impact of individual schools on similar students, SDP’s analysis continues to show that there is much to be gained by looking more deeply at the data,” said SDP Executive Director Sarah Glover. “We hope this information—in the hands of superintendents, principals, guidance counselors, parents, and students in our partner districts—will allow all of those people to make decisions that can significantly improve student outcomes.”

SDP's analyses link student records from K–12 districts to college enrollment records maintained by the National Student Clearinghouse, enabling student trajectories to be examined from grade school and high school all the way into college. These indicators allow K–12 leaders to have a finer-grained understanding regarding patterns of college readiness, college enrollment, and college persistence among their high school students, and to uncover variability that may have never been detected using usual methods of data reporting.

The three SPIs being released today are: 1) *College Choice*, 2) *Off-Track Status in High School*, and 3) *The High School Effect*.

College Choice uncovers a group of highly successful students in each district who do not attend college at all or enroll in colleges and universities that are less challenging than those for which they are academically prepared. In fact, across districts examined in these analyses, between 7 and 16 percent of high performing students do not enroll in college. Other high achieving students opt to attend less selective postsecondary institutions. Additional analyses, conducted by SDP and others, confirm that students are more likely to drop out from colleges that are not sufficiently academically challenging for them.

In *Off-Track Status in High School*, SDP analysts observed that almost all students who fall academically off track in high school as measured by credits attained are already off track by the end of ninth grade. This SPI, which tracks the proportion of students who move from being “off track” to being “on track”, can serve to focus a district’s attention on at-risk students while there is time to intervene and improve a student’s chances of timely high school graduation.

The High School Effect highlights the wide variation in college-going rates for students with similar levels of eighth grade academic achievement who attend different high schools within a district. The analysis reveals that some schools are better at helping lower performing students successfully enroll in college. This indicator suggests the importance of individual schools in meaningfully influencing their students’ likelihood of enrolling in college.

“We know that attending college has a great power to change life’s trajectory for students. While college may not be appropriate for every young person, every school district in America should know which of their students are going to college, where they are going, and how long they are persisting,” said College Board President David Coleman. “If we don’t know which of our kids are going to college and how they are doing, then we can’t understand how our school systems are enabling and supporting those choices.”

"As the new superintendent for the School District of Philadelphia, I am relieved to have this information at my fingertips," said Philadelphia School Superintendent Dr. William R. Hite Jr. "In school districts, it is not always easy to get such a clear line of sight to key performance measures like these. These college-going indicators are strategically important information to guide our

planning, resource allocation, help for schools, and, most importantly, assistance to students and families. This is exactly the kind of information that my counterparts across the country need to establish thoughtful and bold plans for our districts."

The Strategic Data Project developed the SPIs with the goal of establishing common indicators—not unlike a financial ratio that can illuminate the financial health of a firm or the on-base percentage of a hitter in baseball—that can be measured in a standard way and analyzed repeatedly over time and in many places. Education systems can use these indicators to benchmark their progress—both against themselves over time, and in relation to other districts with similar populations.

"This project encourages the education sector to use data strategically, so they can get a better understanding of how progress is being made and what can be done systematically to shape better outcomes for students," said Vicki Phillips, Director of Education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

"The Harvard Graduate School of Education is proud to be part of this work—but, ever more so, we are impressed by the commitment of these districts to closely examine their performance on such important measures," said Dean Kathleen McCartney. "To do this openly, sharing the findings with their peers and communities, demonstrates courageous and bold leadership. This is what it will take to improve outcomes for students."

Several pioneering districts across the U.S. partnered with SDP to make this possible. They shared up to 10 years of historical data, allowing the SDP research team to pull together enormous data sets and assemble and link data across organizational silos. SDP and district staff worked side-by-side to analyze these data for a deep understanding of current performance and opportunities to improve. Results presented include Boston Public Schools (MA), Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC), Fort Worth Independent School District (TX), Fulton County Schools (GA), Gwinnett County Public Schools (GA), Albuquerque Public Schools (NM), Los Angeles Unified School District (CA), and The School District of Philadelphia (PA). The districts highlighted in these reports collectively serve nearly 1.5 million students, 61 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and 82 percent of whom are ethnic minorities.

SDP will release additional SPIs next year with the continued goal that each indicator will be an opportunity for school districts across the country to better understand their own performance. Districts and states that are interested in utilizing these indicators can download the SDP Toolkit for Effective Data Use (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/sdp/tools/>) and may also choose to upload their data to the Schoolzilla data management platform (<https://schoolzilla.org/>).

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The Strategic Data Project was founded in 2008 on the belief that analyzing and using data in new ways can dramatically improve student outcomes. Better access to appropriately analyzed data will allow system leaders to better diagnose issues, develop potential solutions, and monitor the results of implementing these solutions. Our theory of action is that if we bring together the right people, assemble the right data, and perform the right analysis, collectively, we can improve decisions such that student achievement increases significantly.

The Center for Education Policy Research

The rapid accumulation of student achievement data represents an untapped national resource, one that holds the promise of breaking longstanding stalemates in the education policy debate. The Center for Education Policy Research works with University-based researchers and policymakers to bring these new data to bear in evaluating policies and drawing implications for reform. As a national convener with alumni in leadership positions in districts around the country, the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard University are uniquely placed to play this national leadership role.

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