Impact of a Continuous Improvement-Focused Family Engagement Intervention on Ninth Grade Attendance and Course Passing

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Paper presented at the annual meetings of the

American Educational Research Association (online)

April 2021

This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305H150081 to the Johns Hopkins University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Abstract

This study used comparative interrupted times series analyses to assess the impact of a continuous improvement-focused family engagement intervention on ninth grade attendance and course passing rates. The intervention, conducted in an urban district, sought to improve middle and high school family engagement practices during the transition to high school. The initiative created a networked learning community of school teams that received training and coaching in applying the continuous improvement process to family engagement planning and implementation. After four years of implementation, there was no evidence of a significant positive effect on ninth grade student outcomes. Lack of positive effects could be due both to implementation issues and to other ninth grade interventions in the comparison district.

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Despite the substantial rise in high school graduation rates over the past decade (DePaoli et al., 2018), students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds still lag behind in successfully completing high school and postsecondary education. Narrowing this opportunity gap remains a major challenge for policymakers and practitioners. Research has established that the best leading indicators of college-ready high school graduation rates are ninth grade course passing rates, which are highly correlated with ninth grade attendance (e.g., Allensworth & Easton, 2007). We know that attendance and course-passing rates drop dramatically as students move from eighth grade into ninth grade (e.g., Mac Iver & Messel, 2013). Yet just as students are making this critical transition to high school, research also shows that family involvement in their education declines precipitously as high schools place less priority on engaging families at this developmental stage when students want to declare more independence (e.g., Simon, 2004).

Family engagement, particularly "supporting parents to support learning," is one of the essential elements for improving urban schools (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 57). Building on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Epstein (1987) identified the importance of ensuring that schools actively take into account their "overlapping spheres of influence" with families and communities. This involves a more systematic approach to building school-family-community partnerships than the "random acts of family engagement" (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010) that are currently prevalent in many schools. While the "dual capacity building" framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) has emphasized that families and school staff need to work together and learn from each other, considerable work remains to create and sustain the kinds of school-family partnerships that will, in fact, support student learning success.

The family engagement component of school organization continues to challenge most high schools, particularly high-poverty schools with low graduation rates (e.g., United Way-Harvard Family Engagement Project, 2011; Wallace, 2013; Williams & Sanchez, 2012). Numerous studies have noted the decline in family engagement as children progress from elementary to middle and high school (e.g., Spera, 2005). Even when schools attempt to involve families in students' transition to high school, they do not always succeed in coordinating efforts effectively. One nationally representative study found that fewer than one in four parents experienced outreach from both the "feeder" middle school and "receiver" high school in preparation for the transition to high school, and nearly one in five parents experienced no communication from either school (Crosnoe, 2009).

Research indicates that parents play an important role during adolescence and respond when schools take initiative and reach out to them (e.g., Chao & Hill, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Ice, & Whitaker, 2009). At the high school level, various forms of outreach have been linked to higher levels of family educational support to students (Simon, 2004). Experimental studies have shown that low-cost interventions using mailings and text messaging to families can yield significant improvements in student attendance and course performance (e.g., Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Robinson et al., 2018). But even when schools are

committed to a systematic approach to engaging families, a national survey of those schools identified a perceived need to improve how they were engaging families during the transition to high school (Mac Iver et al., 2015).

Intervention and Theory of Action

The intervention sought to increase the capacity of middle and high schools for effective engagement of families as students made the transition into high school. Our theory of action, informed by previous findings (e.g., Sanders & Simon, 2002), posited that increased support and training for school teams in their family engagement activity would lead to an increase in effective practices. Improved family engagement by schools during this transition should lead to increased capacity of families to support students during the critical ninth grade year, particularly in regular attendance and academic effort (e.g., Sheldon, 2007). This should contribute to an increase in ninth grade attendance and course passing rates and ultimately to better high school and postsecondary outcomes.

The intervention involved a four-year partnership between university researchers and an urban district that focused on applying a continuous improvement framework (Bryk et al., 2015) to address family engagement as one of the underlying drivers of ninth grade attendance and course performance (Mac Iver, Epstein, & Sheldon, 2021; Mac Iver et al., 2018. The district increased its support for secondary schools in their family engagement efforts by providing 10 hours of professional development and additional coaching each year to middle and high school teams. School teams participated in a networked learning community with other schools to improve their family engagement activities for students' transition to high school, with the goal of improving ninth grade attendance and course passing rates. Professional development included training for district leaders and school-level family engagement teams to engage in plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles of inquiry to try new or improved family engagement strategies, make observations about how well they were working, and reflect on their learning as they planned the next steps in their family engagement efforts. School teams met together for a full-day training and several shorter meetings throughout the year, and were coached approximately monthly by a district family engagement staff member.

Data from school leader reports indicated that schools increased the number of family engagement activities related to the high school transition and reached more families with more information about ways to support student success than they had in the past (Mac Iver, Sheldon, & Rice, 2019). Based on survey responses from school leaders at the end of Year 2, half or more of the participating schools reported that they engaged in several family engagement practices for the <u>first time</u> during this initiative, including: 1) developing a family engagement plan that includes the transition to high school as a major component; 2) implementing <u>more than one</u> activity during the school year to reach families with students transitioning to high school; 3) working closely with their feeder middle school(s) or receiving high school(s) on engaging families in the transition; 4) keeping records on parent attendance at activities and other types of family engagement; and 5) engaging in a cycle of inquiry with others at their school about how family engagement activities could be improved.

Study Research Questions and Methodology

The study addressed the following research question: To what extent do ninth grade student outcomes of attendance and course passing improve over the four years of the project, (measured at yearly intervals for attendance and semester intervals for course performance) in the treatment district compared to a demographically similar district not receiving the intervention?

We used a comparative interrupted times series quasi-experimental design for the study. To determine the effect of the treatment, we compared: 1) outcome growth rates at treatment schools before and after implementation, examining changes in the slopes and trend lines at the point of intervention (with three years of pre-intervention data); and 2) changes in the growth rates at treatment schools against those of comparison schools over the same time period to rule out threats to internal validity. We estimated analytic models using HLM, nesting all students over the seven-year period (six years for attendance analyses)[1] within their schools. Models included an intercept and treatment coefficient for each baseline year leading up to the intervention and each year after the intervention began.

Data

Student administrative data for three years prior to the intervention commencement year and the four years of the intervention were provided to the research team by both the treatment and comparison districts. Data included the dependent variables (ninth grade student attendance and course passing rates) and covariates (eighth grade attendance, gender, race/ethnicity, ELL status, special education status), as well as school level proportion of students eligible for free/reduced price lunch (not available at the individual level). The total number of schools analyzed included eight regular high schools in the treatment district and nine regular high schools in the comparison district. (Two regular high schools in the treatment district declined to participate in the initiative and were excluded from analyses.) The total analytical sample of students from all seven years was 32,552 students nested in 17 schools.

Findings

Tables 1 and 2 summarize pre-intervention characteristics of the treatment and comparison schools and baseline characteristics of the student samples. Although the two districts and their high schools were similar on many demographic variables when they were identified prior to the study, analyses of 9th grade outcome data identified significant differences at baseline, favoring the treatment district, in percent of credits earned and percent of students with course failures.

Table 3 presents findings from HLM analyses for the dichotomous chronic absence (missed more than 90% of days) dependent variable. As expected, ninth grade chronic absence

[1] Comparability issues for attendance data from the pre-intervention years for the comparison district led us to drop the first pre-intervention year (2012-13) from attendance analyses.

was strongly associated with eighth grade attendance and student demographic variables (higher for special education students and English language learners, Black and Hispanic students). Controlling for all these factors, treatment schools were not significantly different from comparison schools at baseline. Analyses of intercepts for the chronic absence dependent variable for each year showed a significant downward trend. By the third year of intervention, however, the treatment district had a higher rate of chronic absence ($p=.05$) than the comparison district. This finding was in the opposite direction than hypothesized (see Figure 1).

Table 4 summarizes findings from similar HLM analyses for the dichotomous course failure (failed at least one semester course) dependent variable. Ninth grade course failure was similarly strongly associated with student's grade 8 attendance and demographic characteristics. Treatment district students were significantly less likely than comparison district students to have failed a course during the baseline year, controlling for other covariates. Analyses of intercepts for the course failure dependent variable for each year showed a downward trend that was significant in Years 2, 3, and 4 of the intervention. But the odds of ninth grade course failure were not significantly lower in the treatment district than the comparison district in any of the post-intervention years (see Figure 2). Table 5 reports similar results from HLM analyses for the dichotomous "failed at least two semester courses" variable.

Discussion

These analyses indicate there was not a significant positive effect on ninth grade student outcomes associated with the implemented intervention. As reporting null and/or negative findings is important to the scientific research process, the study should not be discounted for its lack of positive findings. It is important to discuss potential explanations for the lack of positive findings. We consider three particular factors that could help to explain our results: implementation issues, intervention design issues, and practices in the comparison district.

Although there was notable improvement in how treatment schools engaged families during the high school transition (Mac Iver, Sheldon, & Rice, 2019), analyses of their records of reflections during continuous improvement cycles indicated that many schools tended to focus on logistics of "engagement events" rather than on ensuring that all families received the information and help they needed to assist their ninth-grade children improve their attendance and course passing rates (Mac Iver, Rice, & Sheldon, 2019). Further, treatment schools had difficulty ensuring that families with students who were likely to struggle in ninth grade were reached by their engagement efforts (Mac Iver, Sheldon, & Rice, 2019).

The family engagement initiative was a tier 1 intervention, focusing on improving schoolwide implementation of best practices for all students and families. The outcome variables focused on a predictable subset of students (20% or fewer in this district) whose families probably needed more targeted interventions than the larger initiative was designed for. Although schoolwide family engagement initiatives are important to provide all families with information and supports that will help them in their efforts to monitor and encourage their ninth grade students, it is also essential that schools intervene with students and families in timely ways when they show signs of attendance and course performance problems. Given the limited

resources of schools, they may choose to focus more attention more on reactive efforts rather than preventative strategies with families.

Finally, although the comparison district was not implementing a similar intervention focused on equipping secondary schools to improve their family engagement efforts, the national focus on ninth grade early warning indicators did appear to influence various initiatives in that district that probably contributed to improvements in attendance and course passing. The district was focused on reducing chronic absenteeism and improving high school success rates. Ironically, all high schools in the comparison district held parent conferences after first quarter, in time to influence first semester course passing rates – something that we advocated but were not able to convince all partner district schools to implement.

Although our study did not find a significant effect of the this comprehensive family engagement intervention on ninth grade outcomes, other studies have demonstrated that specific family engagement efforts, such as sending text messages to parents about student attendance and grades or remind parents about using the parent portal, do make a significant positive difference in student outcomes (e.g., Bergman & Chan, 2019; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Robinson, Lee, Dearing, & Rogers, 2018; Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers & Feller, 2018). Paying attention to engaging parents as allies in supporting student success during high school, particularly during the critical first year, is an essential strategy for improving high school student outcomes.

Table 1. Baseline Treatment and Comparison District School Characteristics

District	School	Enrollment	Average Daily Attendance	% African American	% Hispanic	% Asian	% White	% Other
Treatment	School A	1669	92.4	31	7	21	37	4
	School B	1275	89.3	21	23	20	31	5
	School C	1171	91.4	14	9	15	57	5
	School D	1018	90.6	12	13	23	45	7
	School E	968	89.4	18	13	18	44	7
	School F	1445	91.6	29	8	54	6	3
	School G	407	82.5	52	14	25	5	4
	School H	838	90.1	37	11	41	6	5
	Average*	1098.88	90.47	24.87	11.81	27.47	30.96	4.89
Comparison	School I	1471	93.2	3	7	8	76	6
	School J	1185	94.3	4	7	4	76	9
	School K	1489	94.0	15	6	5	67	7
	School L	819	93.2	21	27	16	29	7
	School M	1387	92.1	6	17	21	50	6
	School N	1457	93.5	5	9	10	69	7
	School O	1025	91.1	15	21	18	36	10
	School P	421	88.6	59	12	2	17	10
	School Q	771	87.3	23	33	5	30	9
	Average*	1113.89	92.48	12.19	13.80	10.36	56.10	7.54

* All averages (except enrollment) weighted by school enrollment size

Table 1, continued. Baseline Treatment and Comparison District School Characteristics

District	School	% Economically Disadvantaged	% ELL	% Students with Disabilities	% Proficient in English	% Proficient in math	% Freshman On Track to Graduate in 4 Years	4YR Graduation Rate
Treatment	School A	38	8	6	87	72	91	85
	School B	58	12	15	81	62	78	83
	School C	29	7	17	87	77	97	87
	School D	39	7	13	88	58	92	77
	School E	40	8	17	86	63	91	76
	School F	68	19	10	77	67	85	74
	School G	73	28	17	70	35	83	72
	School H	71	12	14	84	68	90	69
	Average*	49.74	11.45	12.72	83.42	65.69	88.58	79.12
Comparison	School I	12	5	6	92.5	85.3	93.9	89.3
	School J	22	6	12	91.8	80.4	95.0	84.4
	School K	24	5	10	92.6	83.3	90.9	84.3
	School L	68	26	12	87.1	75.9	79.2	82.2
	School M	56	26	14	89.2	77.7	90.6	78.4
	School N	29	9	9	92.6	80.2	88.7	76.2
	School O	68	29	17	72.2	64.9	77.4	71.0
	School P	82	13	16	57.3	37.0	81.0	58.3
	School Q	76	30	22	78.1	59.0	N/A	N/A
	Average*	41.69	15.03	12.11	86.89	75.73	88.53	80.11

* All averages (except enrollment) weighted by school enrollment size

Table 2

Baseline Characteristics of First-Time Ninth Graders in Treatment and Comparison Districts

	Treatment	**Comparison**	**Difference**	**P-Value**
N =	***2,824***	***2,505***		
Female	49%	48%	+1%	.235
English-Language-Learner	6%	2%	+4%	.000*
Special Education	13%	15%	-2%	.236
Asian	21%	9%	+12%	.000*
Black	16%	11%	+5%	.000*
White	43%	54%	-11%	.000*
Hispanic	12%	17%	-5%	.000*
Other Ethnicity	8%	9%	-1%	.072
Overage for Grade	7%	5%	+2%	.005*
8th Grade Attendance Rate	94.5%	94.5%	0.0%	.903
9th Grade Attendance Rate	93.5%	93.5%	0.0%	.822
% Attending less than 90%	18%	19%	-1%	.203
Percent of 9th Grade Credits Earned	94.3%	92.4%	+1.9%	.000*
% with 1 or more semester failures	21%	27%	-6%	.000*

Table 3

Relationship between Student and School Characteristics and Ninth Grade Chronic Absence

Fixed Effect	**Coefficient**	**Standard Error**	**P-Value**	**Odds Ratio**
***Intercept for baseline Chronic Absence in 2013-14,* B0**				
Intercept, G00	-1.94	0.09	0.000***	0.14
Treatment School, G01	-0.03	0.12	0.811	0.97
% F/RL Eligible, G02	1.00	0.17	0.000***	2.72
Slope for Female Students, B1				
Intercept, G10	0.18	0.04	0.000***	1.20
Slope for English Language Learner Students, B2				
Intercept, G20	0.31	0.08	0.000***	1.36
Slope for Special Education Students, B3				
Intercept, G30	0.45	0.05	0.000***	1.57
Slope for Asian Students, B4				
Intercept, G40	-0.25	0.08	0.001***	0.78
Slope for Black Students, B5				
Intercept, G50	0.63	0.06	0.000***	1.88
Slope for Hispanic Students, B6				
Intercept, G60	0.60	0.05	0.000***	1.82
Slope for Students of other Ethnicity, B7				
Intercept, G70	0.37	0.07	0.000***	1.45

Slope for Overage Students, B8				
Intercept, G80	0.14	0.07	0.065	1.15
Slope for Student's 8th Grade Attendance, B9				
Intercept, G90	-0.28	0.00	0.000***	0.76
Slope for 2014-15 School Year, B10				
Intercept, G100	-0.06	0.11	0.575	0.94
Treatment School, G101	-0.07	0.16	0.657	0.93
Slope for 2015-16 School Year, B11				
Intercept, G110	-0.36	0.14	0.018*	0.70
Treatment School, G111	0.38	0.20	0.073	1.47
Slope for 2016-17 School Year, B12				
Intercept, G120	-0.35	0.14	0.028*	0.71
Treatment School, G121	0.30	0.21	0.170	1.35
Slope for 2017-18 School Year, B13				
Intercept, G130	-0.50	0.13	0.001***	0.61
Treatment School, G131	0.39	0.18	0.050*	1.48
Slope for 2018-19 School Year, B14				
Intercept, G140	-0.29	0.16	0.094	0.75
Treatment School, G141	0.41	0.24	0.104	1.51

Table 4

Relationship between Student and School Characteristics and Ninth Grade Course Failure

Fixed Effect	**Coefficient**	**Standard Error**	**P-Value**	**Odds Ratio**
***Intercept for baseline Course Failure in 2012-13,* B0**				
Intercept, G00	-0.97	0.13	0.000***	0.38
Treatment School, G01	-0.77	0.19	0.001***	0.46
% F/RL Eligible, G02	1.58	0.19	0.000***	4.88
Slope for Female Students, B1				
Intercept, G10	-0.49	0.03	0.000***	0.61
Slope for English Language Learner Students, B2				
Intercept, G20	0.50	0.06	0.000***	1.64
Slope for Special Education Students, B3				
Intercept, G30	0.61	0.04	0.000***	1.84
Slope for of Asian Students, B4				
Intercept, G40	-0.13	0.06	0.019*	0.88
Slope for of Black Students, B5				
Intercept, G50	1.23	0.04	0.000***	3.42
Slope for of Hispanic Students, B6				
Intercept, G60	1.08	0.04	0.000***	2.95
Slope for Students of other Ethnicity, B7				
Intercept, G70	0.63	0.05	0.000***	1.88
Slope for Overage Students, B8				

Intercept, G80	0.07	0.06	0.241	1.07
Slope for # of Credits Attempted, B9				
Intercept, G90	-0.03	0.02	0.130	0.97
Slope for Student's 8th Grade Attendance, B10				
Intercept, G100	-0.11	0.00	0.000***	0.90
Slope for 2013-14 School Year, B11				
Intercept, G110	0.04	0.16	0.792	1.05
Treatment School, G111	0.07	0.24	0.762	1.08
Slope for 2014-15 School Year, B12				
Intercept, G120	-0.27	0.17	0.140	0.76
Treatment School, G121	0.24	0.25	0.364	1.27
Slope for 2015-16 School Year, B13				
Intercept, G130	-0.35	0.17	0.056	0.70
Treatment School, G131	0.21	0.25	0.409	1.24
Slope for 2016-17 School Year, B14				
Intercept, G140	-0.57	0.17	0.005**	0.57
Treatment School, G141	0.27	0.25	0.306	1.30
Slope for 2017-18 School Year, B15				
Intercept, G150	-0.67	0.17	0.001***	0.51
Treatment School, G151	0.12	0.25	0.637	1.13
Slope for 2018-19 School Year, B16				
Intercept, G160	-0.63	0.16	0.002**	0.53
Treatment School, G161	0.13	0.24	0.587	1.14

Table 5
Relationship between Student and School Characteristics and 2 or More Ninth Grade Course Failures

Fixed Effect	**Coefficient**	**Standard Error**	**P-Value**	**Odds Ratio**
***Intercept for baseline Course Failure in 2012-13*, B0**				
Intercept, G00	-1.47	0.15	0.000***	0.23
Treatment School, G01	-0.90	0.22	0.001***	0.41
% F/RL Eligible, G02	1.83	0.20	0.000***	6.23
Slope for Female Students, B1				
Intercept, G10	-0.54	0.03	0.000***	0.58
Slope for English Language Learner Students, B2				
Intercept, G20	0.49	0.06	0.000***	1.62
Slope for Special Education Students, B3				
Intercept, G30	0.54	0.04	0.000***	1.72
Slope for of Asian Students, B4				
Intercept, G40	-0.16	0.07	0.021*	0.85
Slope for of Black Students, B5				
Intercept, G50	1.20	0.05	0.000***	3.33
Slope for of Hispanic Students, B6				
Intercept, G60	1.11	0.05	0.000***	3.03
Slope for Students of other Ethnicity, B7				
Intercept, G70	0.68	0.06	0.000***	1.96
Slope for Overage Students, B8				

Intercept, G80	0.07	0.06	0.256	1.08
Slope for # of Credits Attempted, B9				
Intercept, G90	-0.02	0.02	0.304	0.98
Slope for Student's 8th Grade Attendance, B10				
Intercept, G100	-0.11	0.00	0.000***	0.90
Slope for 2013-14 School Year, B11				
Intercept, G110	0.07	0.16	0.663	1.07
Treatment School, G111	0.17	0.24	0.488	1.19
Slope for 2014-15 School Year, B12				
Intercept, G120	-0.19	0.17	0.280	0.82
Treatment School, G121	0.19	0.25	0.475	1.21
Slope for 2015-16 School Year, B13				
Intercept, G130	-0.35	0.18	0.080	0.71
Treatment School, G131	0.29	0.27	0.300	1.34
Slope for 2016-17 School Year, B14				
Intercept, G140	-0.52	0.21	0.028*	0.59
Treatment School, G141	0.08	0.31	0.801	1.08
Slope for 2017-18 School Year, B15				
Intercept, G150	-0.61	0.16	0.002**	0.54
Treatment School, G151	-0.01	0.24	0.976	0.99
Slope for 2018-19 School Year, B16				
Intercept, G160	-0.58	0.16	0.002**	0.56
Treatment School, G161	-0.06	0.24	0.807	0.94

Figure 1

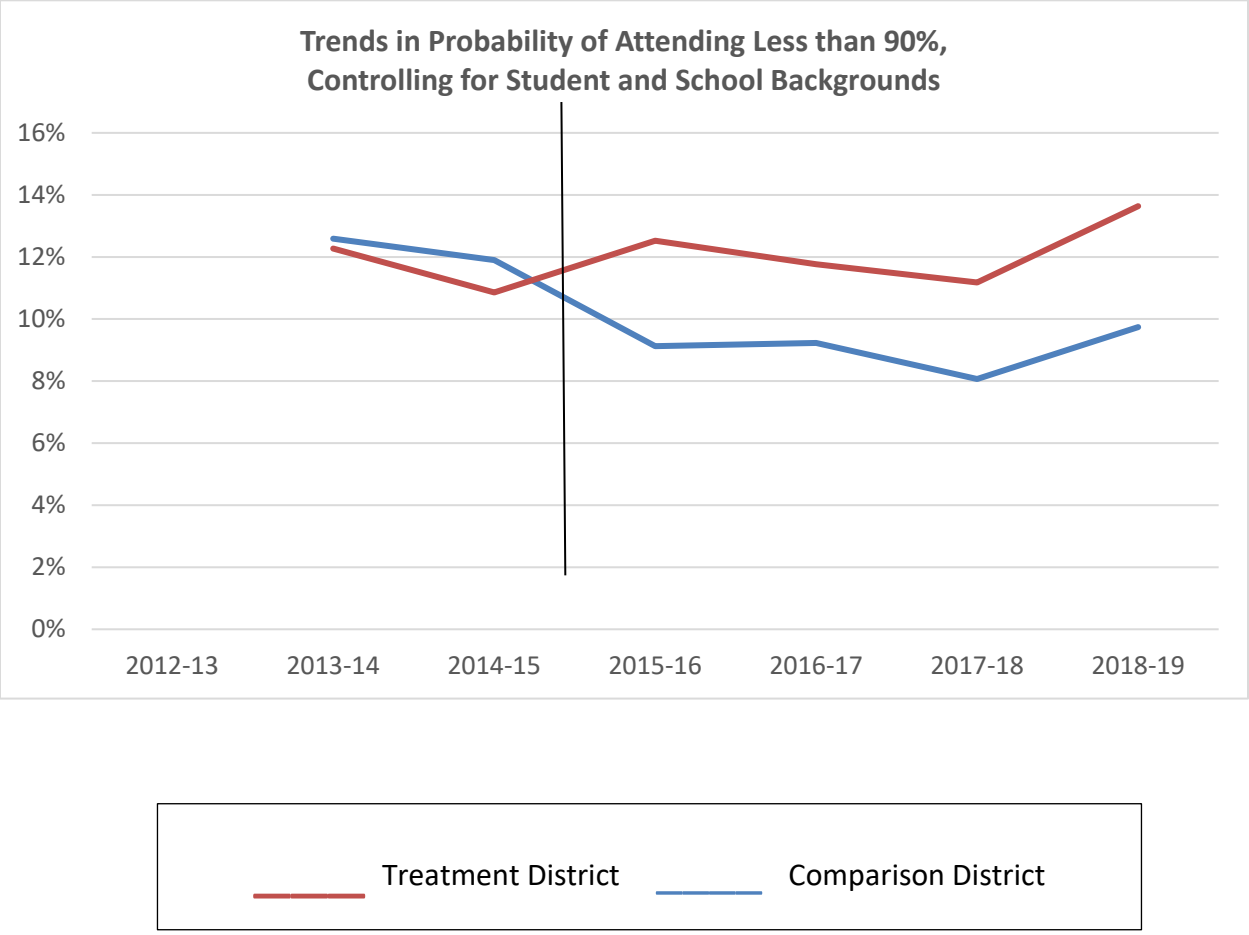

Trends in Probability of Attending Less than 90%,
Controlling for Student and School Backgrounds
16%
14%
12%
10%
8%
6%
4%
2%
0%
2012-13
2013-14
2014-15
2015-16
2016-17
2017-18
2018-19
Treatment District
Comparison District

Figure 2

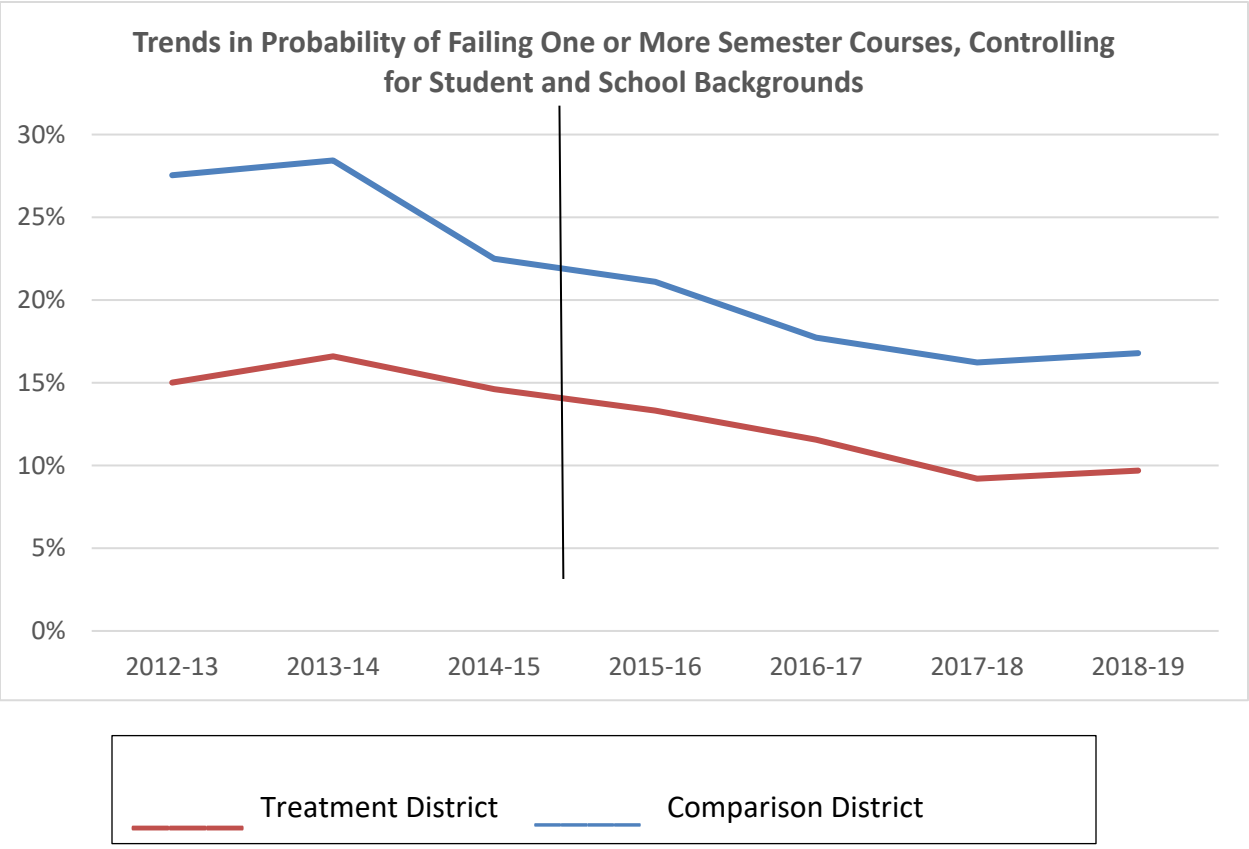
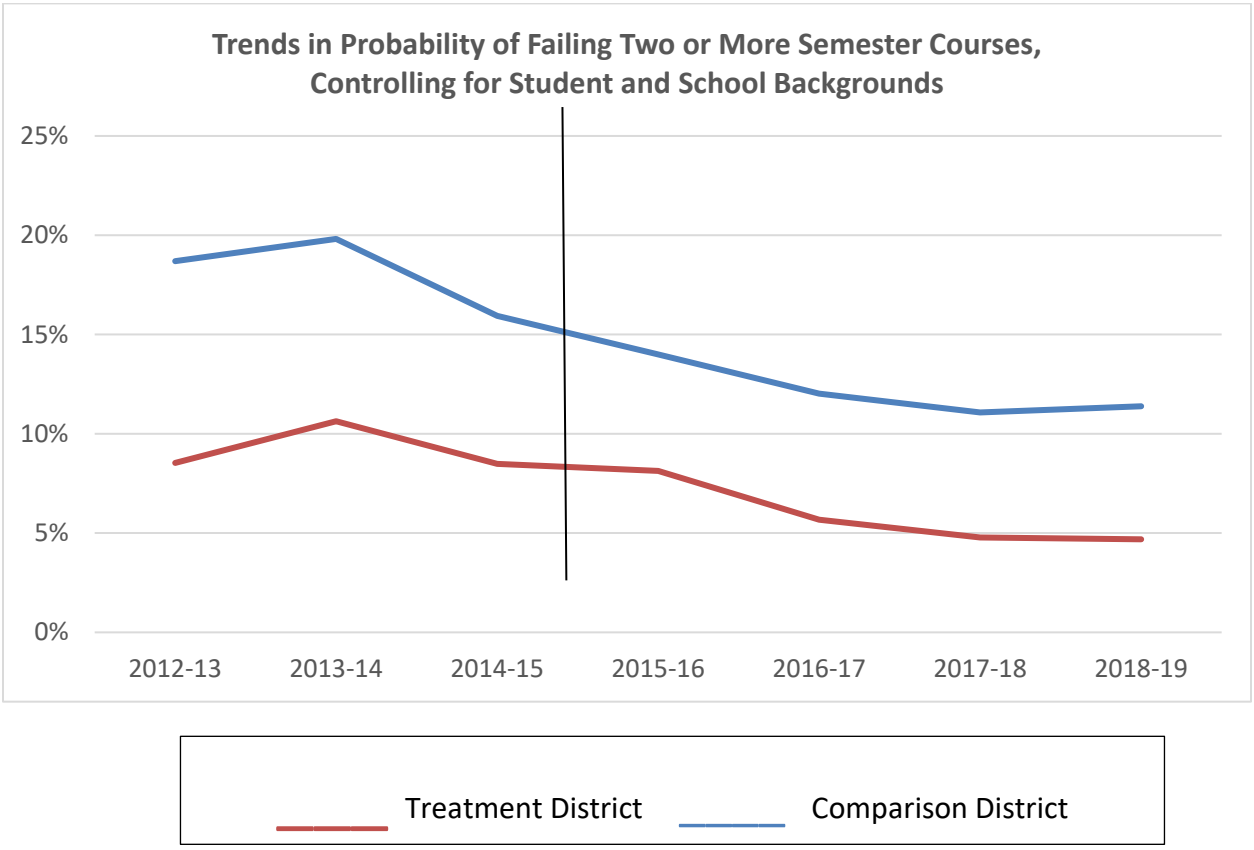

Trends in Probability of Failing One or More Semester Courses, Controlling for Student and School Backgrounds
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
2012-13
2013-14
2014-15
2015-16
2016-17
2017-18
2018-19
Treatment District
Comparison District

Figure 3


Trends in Probability of Failing Two or More Semester Courses, Controlling for Student and School Backgrounds
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
2012-13
2013-14
2014-15
2015-16
2016-17
2017-18
2018-19
Treatment District
Comparison District

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