

Removing Structural Barriers to Academic Achievement in High Schools:  
An Innovative Model

Camille A. Farrington

University of Illinois at Chicago

Margaret H. Small

Young Women's Leadership Charter School

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### Abstract

A significant number of students in urban high schools demonstrate chronic patterns of academic underperformance, leading to dropout rates of 30% and higher. Attempts to increase graduation rates and improve high school outcomes through changes in curriculum, instruction, and support programs have had limited impact. This paper addresses dropout as a structural problem, rooted in the traditional mechanisms for determining final grades and awarding course credit, and argues that these structural mechanisms virtually assure some percentage of student failure and impede the ability of struggling students to get back on track toward graduation. An alternative model of school-wide student evaluation is presented that successfully addresses the issue of differential learning rates within the regular structure of high school marking periods.

Removing Structural Barriers to Academic Achievement in High Schools:  
An Innovative Model

A significant number of students in urban high schools demonstrate chronic patterns of academic underperformance. Common patterns of repeated academic failure and disengagement from formal schooling contribute to four-year dropout rates of 30% and higher in urban high schools nationally (Barton, 2005; Brown, 1993; Greene & Winters, 2005; Swanson, 2003; Swanson, 2004). Even among urban students who do graduate from high school, many have not mastered basic literacy and numeracy skills and lack a solid understanding of science, history, civics, and other fields of knowledge important to civic and economic participation. Students of color and students from impoverished backgrounds, who most need a high school diploma and solid education to access a wider range of opportunity, are the students least likely to graduate due to high rates of dropout and least likely to possess essential foundational knowledge due to chronic underperformance (Greene & Winters, 2005). Attempts to address these problems through changes in curriculum, changes in instruction, and changes in support programs have had limited impact on overall graduation rates (Mann, 1986).

In this paper, we argue that chronic academic underperformance in urban high schools is largely the result of an historical “structure” of student academic achievement, defined as the mastery of a given content within a fixed period of time. By holding constant the amount of instructional time regardless of student needs, academic skills, or background knowledge, this structure of achievement virtually assures some percentage of student failure (Bloom, 1968; Carroll, 1963). A related school structure – the mechanism for awarding course credit – prevents students from recovering from early

failure when they try. Taken together, these two structural mechanisms make it likely for many students to fail and unlikely for failing students to get back on track to graduate.

Ironically, these structural mechanisms were initially put into place in American high schools by college and university administrators who wanted to ensure a worthy applicant pool for higher education. The traditional use of semester grades and Carnegie units to award course credit has served two intended and related purposes for the last century: (a) stratifying students for the labor market, and (b) providing quality control in the transition from high school to college while facilitating this transition for the upper strata (Eliot, 1909; Tyack, 1974). As our public goals have shifted over time from “the best and the brightest” to the notion of “no child left behind,” how might these structures, designed to stratify achievement, be impediments to the current aim of universal high school graduation? What might be the relationship between chronic high school failure/dropout and the structural apparatus that organizes the traditional high school experience into time-limited learning opportunities? While recent federal and state pressures to “raise standards” are intended to address the problems of chronic underachievement, by raising the bar we may be lowering the boom on under-prepared high school students, given the current structure of academic achievement in America’s high schools.

We have two major objectives in this paper: (a) to present a theoretical framework for restructuring student evaluation at the secondary level that problematizes the historical structure of achievement and posits this structure as a major barrier to high school completion, and (b) to describe an innovative model that restructures achievement to prevent course failure and resultant credit deficiency. This model of student evaluation

addresses the issue of differential learning rates within the general structure of regular high school marking periods, and has a profound effect on student success rates as measured by high school completion.

We developed this model of student evaluation with our colleagues at the Young Women's Leadership Charter School of Chicago (YWLCS), a small non-selective urban charter high school with 325 students, where we began implementing this system in August 2000 to evaluate, report and track student academic progress. Our goal was to create a system of student evaluation that would encourage low-achieving students to persevere in high school as they built the skills necessary to graduate. The YWLCS model has contributed to a four-year graduation rate for the school that is significantly higher than the rate for the rest of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), even while serving a student body representative of the regular CPS population in terms of demographics and achievement levels at entrance to high school (Chicago Public Schools, 2005b).<sup>1</sup> In the new CPS district-wide High School Scorecard, issued in the fall of 2005, Young Women's Leadership Charter School was ranked as having the highest graduation rate of the 58 non-selective "general" high schools in the Chicago Public Schools with its initial graduating class of 2004 (Chicago Public Schools, 2005a). Controlling for student demographic and achievement variables to find "value-added" graduation rates by school for the entry cohort of 2000, the Consortium on Chicago School Research reported that students attending YWLCS were 1.7 times more likely to graduate than comparable students attending the average Chicago Public high school (Allensworth, 2005). Four other public high schools around the country are now using the YWLCS student

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<sup>1</sup> CPS reported a 4-year graduation rate for YWLCS of 85.3% as compared to 59.6% for a composite CPS comparison school based on demographic and zip code data from YWLCS students.

evaluation system.<sup>2</sup> It serves as a model for a new generation of school-based assessment systems by restructuring achievement in a way that supports students to complete high school with the skills and knowledge essential for higher education.

## THE TRADITIONAL ACHIEVEMENT MODEL

### Historical Framework

When referring to the “structure” of academic achievement in the traditional high school model, we include all of the following historical components: semester marking periods, Carnegie units, course credits, classroom grading schemes, reports cards, permanent letter grades, and high school transcripts. Much of this structure is the legacy of the standardization of college admissions guidelines in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1899, the National Education Association’s Committee on College Entrance Requirements recommended that a standard unit be developed to assess high school curricula so that colleges could reasonably determine the adequacy of a student’s preparation for higher education (National Education Association, 1899), even though only a fraction of the students who attended public schools would seek to attend college. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which had recently created a highly desirable pension fund for college professors, “mandated that colleges require fourteen ‘units’ for entrance to freshman year if [the professors at the college] wished to be eligible for acceptance to the Foundation’s pension fund” (Lagemann, 1999, p. 95). This was obviously a powerful incentive for colleges to implement a unit-based admissions program, and in 1908, the National Conference Committee on Standards of

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to YWLCS, two other public high schools in Chicago, one in Boston, and one outside of Cincinnati are currently using the YWLCS system for student evaluation, grading, course credit and promotion. The Ohio school is in Year 2 of implementation, and the Boston and Chicago schools are in Year 1. Due to their relatively recent implementation, no four-year graduation data are yet available from these school sites.

Colleges and Secondary Schools, a group convened to “consider standards of admission [and] matters of common interest to universities, colleges, and secondary schools,” held its third annual meeting in the offices of the Carnegie Foundation to work out the details of the new “Carnegie Unit” (Ferry, 1908, p. 834; Lagemann, 1999). The new College Entrance Examination Board adopted the Carnegie unit system in 1909, further solidifying its central place in the structure of American secondary schools (Downey, 1910). Standardization in higher education paralleled the development of secondary schools in the United States in a time increasingly marked by a national fascination with the principles of scientific management and a corollary obsession with educational “efficiency,” in search of the “one best system” for educating students beyond the elementary level (Tyack, 1974). The Carnegie unit, the equivalent of precisely 120 hours of instructional time in a year, is a clear product of these times.

For the purposes of facilitating college admissions and efficiently organizing instructional delivery, secondary school calendars were divided into semesters, and courses were configured into 60-hour learning blocks per semester. At the end of each semester, students were given examinations to evaluate their learning, and grades were assigned to designate their achievement. All students received the same instruction within the classroom and instructional time was controlled, so the dependent variable was achievement, and students inevitably distributed themselves along a normal curve from success to failure (Bloom, 1968; Carroll, 1963). Each student’s level of achievement was then permanently recorded on his or her official transcript, designated initially by percentile scores which were eventually replaced by letter grades A to F. If the student earned a passing grade at the end of the semester, he or she was awarded “credit” for the

class in the form of half a Carnegie unit. If the student failed to achieve a passing grade, the student would need to retake the course in order to earn the credit. The point of this brief history is that “achievement” in secondary schools – as measured by Carnegie units and permanently recorded by grades on transcripts – was structured largely in response to the needs of colleges and of the relatively few college-bound students in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than in the best interests of the total population of high school students, even within that early time period.<sup>3</sup>

Resistance to the Carnegie unit arose immediately upon its implementation (and has persisted ever since), as critics noted that the time one spent in a class should not be equated with the level of understanding of course content one had developed (Aikin, 1942; Judd, 1914; The Reporter, 1935; White & Duker, 1973). Ironically, even colleges and universities began to chafe under the limited value of the Carnegie unit. In 1911, Harvard introduced a “new plan” whereby students could demonstrate competency for admission based on examinations in four subject areas in lieu of accumulated high school credits. The goal of the new policy, explained Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell, was “to get an impression of the individual as he stands, rather than of the instruction he has been through” (Cowley, 1940, p. 346). Educators expressed concerns that earning credits replaced learning as the goal of secondary schooling, and that high school teachers were unreasonably constrained by a structure (and a curriculum) designed only for the

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly this approach to secondary education as preparation for college did not go uncontested. John Dewey, Francis Parker, and other members of the Progressive Education Association argued that secondary schools should allow students to explore a wide variety of experiences and develop their talents in preparation for civic life in a democratic society. Others argued for schools as centers for Americanizing immigrants, or as centers for vocational training. While all of these visions were represented in the active debate over the *purpose* of secondary education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *structure* of student achievement in high schools was determined by college entrance requirements shortly after the turn of the century.

college-bound, which represented a small portion of the students they sought to educate (Long, 1934).<sup>4</sup>

From the viewpoint of the creators of this structure of achievement, the American educational system could be seen as a pyramid, with elementary schools forming the broad base and colleges and universities at the narrow peak. They sought to facilitate the transition from high school to college for those who had proven themselves worthy of higher education. That the size of the school population shrank in each subsequent grade level did not particularly worry them. Indeed, that was largely the purpose of the upper elementary and secondary schools, they argued, to winnow out the “laggards”<sup>5</sup> and the “dull-minded” and to let “the cream rise to the top.” Rather than being elitist, advocates of this position saw it as inherently democratic (Dickson, 1922). Most of the designers of this system of student evaluation believed all American children should be given equal access to a college-preparatory education. Their view was wholly meritocratic. Semesters, letter grades, Carnegie units and transcripts were the essential components in the structure that fostered this winnowing process. It is important to note that these structural components, while becoming foundational to the design of the modern high school, were soon viewed as being inadequate to the task of sorting students for college and careers. With the advent of intelligence tests and other standardized measures of student “capacity,” colleges and universities began relying more heavily on these new,

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<sup>4</sup> These concerns came to a head in the form of *The Eight-Year Study* by the Progressive Education Association. See Aiken (1942) and Tyler (2000).

<sup>5</sup> A term used by Leonard Ayres (1909) in reference to the students who progressed more slowly through school than a grade a year. Ayres, however, did not share the view that schools were intended to winnow out such students. Instead, he drew attention to the large numbers of students over age for grade or eliminated entirely from the system with each passing year. He saw this as a sign of the mismatch between the structure of schools and the needs of many students.

“objective” measures to make admissions decisions (Hubin, 1988; Lemann, 1999; Tyack, 1974).

### Structural Components

Together these components structured the developing concept of academic achievement in the new American secondary schools of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the decades that followed, this conceptual structure became the cornerstone of the modern American high school. The percentage of Americans who attend college has never been more than 65% of the eligible graduating population (Jacobson, Olsen, Rice, Sweetland, & Ralph, 2001), and hovers around 35% of the total population ages 20-24 (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). Meanwhile, well over 90% of American youth attend high school, and the outcomes of those who do not graduate are relatively dire (Baum & Payea, 2004; Rumberger, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Yet achievement in high school is still structured to facilitate the selection of the few from the many. We turn now to the key components of this structure – Carnegie units, letter grades, grade point averages, report cards, and transcripts – to explore their function and their implications for underachieving students in urban high schools.

#### *Carnegie Units*

Today, under the structure of achievement defined by the Carnegie unit, a student’s goal is to accumulate enough credits to graduate. State boards of education or state legislatures specify minimum graduation requirements in terms of Carnegie units, as do individual school districts and high schools. Students who do not pass classes become “credit deficient” relative to their peers and the expected path of their progress. Credit deficiency seriously reduces the probability that a student will eventually graduate from

high school. But the system of credit accumulation has another significant drawback. In most high schools in the country, students earn credits for classes they “pass” where the minimum passing grade is a D-minus. Students who pass classes at a D-level proceed through school without the requisite knowledge and skills to succeed in subsequent classes. With diligence, luck, or craftiness, some of these students can still manage to earn the required course credits, but they graduate from high school with few essential academic skills and little content knowledge. In Chicago Public Schools, including magnet and college-preparatory high schools, over a third of all high school graduates in 2002 and 2003 finished high school with a grade point average *below* 2.0 (C-minus or less). Well over half of CPS graduates had grade point averages of 2.4 or below (C-plus or less) (Roderick, Nagaoka, Allensworth, Coca, & Correa, in press). By structuring achievement around *credit accumulation* rather than *learning*, high schools guarantee not only that a large percentage of students will drop out, but also that a large percentage of the remaining students will graduate with few requisite skills and knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

### *Letter Grades*

The traditional structure of student achievement is further complicated by individual classroom grading practices. Brookhard (2004) noted that “The primary purpose for grading – for both individual assignment grades and report card grades – should be to communicate with students and parents about their achievement of learning goals,” and that grades “should convey interpretable, appropriate information about the particular achievement in question” (p. 2). On a broad level (regardless of individual

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<sup>6</sup> While these arguments can apply broadly to high schools in general, my focus here is primarily on urban high schools and the students they serve. The traditional structural mechanism of achievement in high schools is most salient when it is compounding issues of race, poverty, lack of community resources and low quality educational opportunities in the primary grades that contribute to chronic underperformance.

practice), all learning within a semester course is reduced to one letter grade for each student. While students and parents think they understand the significance of one letter versus another, in fact a letter grade gives no information whatsoever about a student's individual strengths or weaknesses, or about the material she has mastered or failed to master (Spady, 1992; Wrinkle, 1935). In other words, letter grades in and of themselves do little to either communicate or record interpretable information about the achievement of specific learning goals.

The lack of informational clarity expressed by a letter grade is further complicated by a lack of comparability of methods for calculating letter grades from one teacher to another. Teachers generally devise their own assignments, their own point systems, and their own weighting of the evidence in calculating grades. While many schools use a common percentage scale for determining final grades (90% and above is an A, 80% and above is a B, etc.), this should by no means reassure anyone that the system *across teachers* is uniform or objective. The key question in this common percentage scale is: percent of *what*? Each individual teacher subjectively determines the *what* in his or her own classes, so there is little uniformity in the meaning of one letter grade versus another across classrooms, even where the course content is allegedly the same. Furthermore, while teachers generally have little or no formal training in assessment or in constructing reliable instruments (Stiggins, 2001; Wise, 1993), most schools offer no opportunity or incentive for teachers to work together to provide critical review of each other's assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Students and parents may often distrust and openly question the accuracy of an individual student's grade, but teachers and

administrators themselves rarely publicly question or examine the reliability and validity of individual teachers' grades, or the methods by which they are derived.

Shortly after the turn of the previous century, Starch and Elliott (1912, 1913a, 1913b) conducted a series of experiments in which they sent to hundreds of high school teachers across the country copies of a final examination with one student's written responses, asking teachers with that subject area expertise to grade the examination on a 100-point scale.<sup>7</sup> The researchers then compared the results, finding enormous variability in the grades different teachers assigned to the same paper. They attributed this variability to four factors: "(1) differences among the standards of different schools, (2) differences among the standards of different teachers, (3) differences in the relative values placed by different teachers upon various elements in the paper, including content and form, and (4) differences due to the pure inability to distinguish between closely allied degrees of merit" (Starch & Elliott, 1992, p. 32). One result of this research was a movement toward letter grades and away from percentage grading (Brookhart, 2004). It was believed that, by reducing the number of achievement levels to five (A, B, C, D, F) instead of one hundred (on a percentage scale), teachers would more accurately and reliably categorize the level of student work. While teachers now routinely report grades using this letter-grade system, there is little reason to believe that the variability in grading across teachers has substantially decreased in the last hundred years. Wide variability in grading, even where the content focus is the same, calls into question the real meaning of any particular letter grade. How clearly or objectively does a C-minus in geometry or a B-plus in English Literature describe the extent of any one individual's

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<sup>7</sup> Starch and Elliott conducted three separate experiments using tests in three different subject areas, one in English, one in mathematics, and one in history. In each case, the exam along with one student's responses was sent to the "principal teacher" in the respective subject area at each school.

understanding of a complex content domain? If an Algebra II teacher receives a new class full of students who earned C's last year in Algebra I, what can the teacher infer about the specific skills or content knowledge these students possess at entrance to the course?

If the purpose of grades is to clearly communicate the achievement of specific learning objectives, then teachers need to be clear and explicit about what the learning objectives are and how they are going to grade their students relative to those objectives (Marzano, 2000; Popham, 2000; Tyler, 1949; Tyler, 2000). Two of the most common grading schemes – dividing the number of points a student earned by the number of points possible, or taking an average of all grades a student earned – while they may be straightforward mathematically, do not provide students with feedback at the level of individual learning objectives. Of central importance in this discussion of grading is the notion of transparency. While teachers often include a grading scale in their course syllabus and generally state how different types of assessments will be weighted (e.g., tests and quizzes account for 50%, and homework accounts for 25% of the final grade), seldom does a teacher state the specific learning objectives of the course, and how different assessments relate to those objectives, or the criteria by which students will be graded. How a teacher calculates a grade is often a mysterious process, sometimes leading a disgruntled student to conclude that the reason for a low grade is because the teacher “just doesn’t like me.” Students who receive a failing grade naturally tend to attribute the grade to external causes (Forsyth, 1986). However, external attributions do little to improve student performance. In order to learn from a failing grade and to try again, a student needs to feel as though her grades are within her control. Transparency

in grading and a teacher's explicit explanation of the relationship between student work and grades are fundamental to improved student performance (Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 2004). Unfortunately, these elements are often missing in the traditional structure of achievement which relies on opaque letter grades in place of useful feedback on learning.

### *Grade Point Averages*

Grade point averages are, as the name implies, merely an averaging of a student's earned letter grades, generally converted to a 4-point scale. In the case of a student who shows academic progress over time, grade point average is inherently unforgiving. The assumption of the current accountability movement is that increased pressure on schools and teachers will force instructional improvements that will bring underperforming students "up to standards." But even if this happens, it happens over time. Students entering high school in the bottom quartile do not immediately perform to standards. Instead they frequently fall short of the mark, at least in their early high school coursework. Their initial substandard performance is permanently recorded on their transcripts and perpetually calculated against them in their grade point averages.

Take the hypothetical case of a student who enters ninth grade without clear future goals, without strong academic skills, and with a relative lack of maturity. Her initial performance mirrors that of a sizable percentage of urban youth at entrance to high school: she fails or barely passes freshman courses (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Let us imagine that the accountability pressures and reform efforts are working at this student's high school, and that she responds to newly improved instruction and effective curriculum by improving her academic performance. She works hard in school and takes

advantage of educational opportunities to build the skills and knowledge she lacked. Her grades move from D's and F's in freshman year to A's and B's by her senior year. Upon graduation, her initial underperformance would be averaged together with her eventual academic success, effectively nullifying her achievement. Her resultant GPA would likely be too mediocre to qualify her for merit-based scholarships and admission to selective colleges. In a second hypothetical case, another student exhibits the opposite pattern. After two strong years of high school, he falls apart in his junior and senior years, barely passing classes and just squeaking by to earn enough credits to graduate. A third student earns solid C's in every class every year. Of course, looking at the grade point averages of these three students, it would be impossible to distinguish one from the other.

By definition, GPAs average together success and failure, and make them look like consistent performance at the mean. Grade point averages were designed for a specific purpose, and that they do well: they clearly identify those students whose performance is consistently stellar (or consistently poor). For the student with a consistently stellar performance, a GPA has bankable value. In most other cases, however, a student's GPA either has no benefit to the student or directly limits the student's future opportunities. Eligibility for colleges, trade schools or scholarships is often determined in part by a student's grade point average. Even car insurance companies calculate rates based in part on students' GPAs.

Grade point average as a structural mechanism has a strong constituency. The use of GPA to predict college and work success is well documented (Geiser & Studley, 2002; Slack & Porter, 1980). Because of its predictive value, it serves well its primary

audience, the college admissions officers. GPA lies at the heart of the meritocratic system of opportunity and functions exactly as intended within that system. But there is a fundamental contradiction between meritocracy and leaving no child behind, a contradiction whose full-blown implications are well beyond the scope of this paper. While acknowledging the predictive value of GPA, one must also question the implications of this structural mechanism that discriminates between those who take four years to bring themselves up from underachievement and those who come into high school already performing in the top stanines. Insofar as initial academic performance is influenced by socioeconomic status and parental education levels (Farkas, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2002), GPA reinforces privilege and effectively bars upward academic mobility by averaging in a student's academic starting point with what she has ultimately achieved. Grade point average is an integral component of the structure implemented for the sake of colleges and the college-bound, with little inherent value, and much potential harm, to the rest of the high school population, even to those students who successfully make the transition over time from underperformance to solid achievement.

#### *Report Cards*

Schools regularly issue report cards as summative evaluations of student learning. Commonly, teachers calculate grades for report cards on a quarterly basis, for the primary purpose of providing to parents and students information about a student's progress. As referenced in the earlier section on letter grades, report card grades are usually recorded and reported without reference to the specific content studied, the learning objectives attained, or the criteria for evaluation. The important point here is that the information provided on the report card – students' grades in each class – is also generally the *only*

student achievement information stored in most school (or district) data systems. While the teacher grade book is an official record which contains much more detailed information as to each student's performance, rarely is this information included in the electronic collection of student achievement data. Generally, if one wanted to know why a student received a B in math or a D in English from a previous year, or perhaps wanted to know what would be suggested areas for improvement indicated by either grade, one would need to contact the issuing teacher directly, and the teacher would need to refer to his or her grade book. If the teacher were no longer employed at the school, that information would be essentially irretrievable. School-level systems for student achievement data do not, as a rule, include detailed information as to a student's performance on specific learning objectives. Rather, all that is recorded and reported is the summative letter grade for the marking period.

### *Transcripts*

A transcript is the official record of student achievement. The salient feature of high school transcripts is that they are permanent records. Once a course grade is entered on a transcript, the student's level of achievement in that subject matter is fixed in time. Because course grades are permanent, the student has no incentive to learn more of the course content once a course is completed. If the student received a low but passing grade, he gains nothing *structurally* by going back and learning whatever material he had not yet mastered when the grade was issued. The credit has already been earned, and learning more of the "old" material would do nothing to improve his grade on the transcript. Furthermore, short of retaking the entire course, structurally there is no opportunity for a passing student to learn what was left unlearned at semester's end. If a

student fails a course, that failure is also permanently recorded. If the failing student retakes the course in the future and earns a passing grade, her original failing grade would still remain a permanent feature on her academic record and would be forever calculated into her overall grade point average.

Some argue that, because grades are permanently recorded on the transcript and forever factored into the calculation of one's grade point average, students develop a fear of failure that motivates them to work harder and earn higher grades (Ebel, 1980). That may be true for many students. However, for students who enter high school with an already established history of failure or underperformance, the permanency of low grades, as recorded by grade point average and high school transcripts, has only deleterious effects, both psychologically and materially (Covington & Müeller, 2001; Crooks, 1988; Weiner, 1979).

#### Standards and the Traditional Structure of Achievement

The traditional structure of achievement as described in this paper places a premium on accumulated course credit rather than learning. Indeed, this situation is what precipitated the move to raise standards and to impose accountability measures as a check on student learning (Ebel, 1980). Unreliability in classroom grading practices and the awarding of course credit and diplomas to students with few high school-level skills provide ammunition for the argument that schools are doing a poor job of internal quality control and that external measures are necessary to verify student achievement (Airasian, 1987; Airasian, 1988; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Ornstein, 1988). This position discounts the professional judgment of educators and classroom assessments in favor of standardized test scores (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Commission on

Instructionally Supportive Assessment, 2001; National Education Association, 2003). Unfortunately, implementing state standards to control curriculum and align instruction does not guarantee the intended connection between classroom grading practices and the acquisition of specific bodies of knowledge. Even where curriculum is aligned to the standards, and grades are aligned to the curriculum, there is no guarantee that grades are aligned to the standards.<sup>8</sup> While the literature on “learning standards” and “educational outcomes” is quite extensive, and one sees evidence of significant efforts at the district, state, and federal levels to develop standards and to measure achievement outcomes, there is very limited discussion of how the existing infrastructure in secondary schools contributes to or impedes the alignment between students passing courses and students meeting standards. Although the move to standards-based education shifts the focus to student outcomes and locates problems in educational underachievement at the school level, there is very little focus on restructuring the schools themselves to become truly outcome-based in their approach to teaching, learning, grading, reporting or tracking student achievement. While educational researchers have identified a “conceptual gap between classroom assessment and system accountability” and theorized about the need for a system of “coherent assessment... that places the assessment work of classroom teachers and system administrators within the same conceptual framework” (Forster & Masters, 2004, p. 64), the traditional structural components of letter grades, transcripts and report cards remain disconnected from systematic standards-based accountability

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<sup>8</sup> As an anecdotal example, one of us recently observed a seventh grader in a Chicago Public School feverishly coloring in photocopied pages filled with Egyptian designs, part of her final project on Ancient Egypt. She explained that her social studies grade was based on how well she colored in the designs and glued them together to make a pre-configured pyramid chamber. (Each part was already drawn and labeled. Her job was to color, cut, and glue.) She had about ten pages of intricate designs to color in, and the project took her several hours to complete. Clearly the curriculum was aligned to the standards with a focus on Ancient Egypt, but the student’s grade on the final project bore no relationship to real learning.

measures. The alignment between student learning and state learning standards is implemented primarily via curriculum changes and instructional changes (not structural changes) and assessed via standardized tests external to the schools themselves, without impacting the traditional structure for evaluating classroom work or tracking and reporting achievement, i.e., classroom grading systems and school report cards.

### Theoretical Framework

In David Berliner's (2005) article on poverty and school reform, he made an interesting observation about poverty in the United States. He noted first that the percentage of non-poor Americans who fall into poverty due to temporary circumstance is roughly equivalent to the percentages in several other industrialized countries. He pointed out, however, that when one compares the number of those people who *remain* in poverty three years later, the U.S. rate is significantly higher than those of our international counterparts. Berliner argued that, while almost anyone the world over can fall into situational poverty – reasons of job loss, divorce, illness, or childbirth are most often the causes in this country – the United States has relatively “few mechanisms to get people out of poverty once they fall into poverty” (p. 10). He alluded to the punitive attitude Americans have toward poor people as one possible explanation for our willingness to let people who stumble into poverty languish there.

We make a parallel argument about school failure within the structure of high school achievement: that there are few mechanisms to help students out of school failure once they fall into it. The downward achievement spiral typically leading to dropping out of high school could be largely turned around by providing such a mechanism,

specifically, by making a structural change in the criteria by which students earn course credit.

Much of the research on high school dropouts seeks to ascertain why students leave high school before graduation, and the literature identifies a variety of individual, family, neighborhood and school characteristics that contribute to early leaving (Fine, 1986; Kelly, 1993; Kerstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Mehan, 1997; Rumberger, 2004; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Many researchers posit that dropping out of high school is not so much a singular event but a long process of progressive disengagement (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). While it is important to understand individual, institutional and social factors that may contribute to the decision to leave school, it is the lack of a flexible and effective system for students to re-engage in academic progress that makes dropping out inevitable for too many young people.

Some of the reasons for initial school failure are similar to those responsible for temporary poverty: parental job loss or divorce and resultant family instability, illness of a student or family member, or the birth of a child to a teenage mother (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006). Quite often the student may just be academically under-prepared for high school work (Joftus, 2002; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Reasons for dropping out reported in the National Educational Longitudinal Study included all of the above, as well as “did not like school” (45.6% of respondents) and “failing school” (39.1% of respondents) (Berkold, Geis, & Kaufman, 1998, p. 18). It may be that the contributing *causes* of a student’s failure in (or disengagement from) school are less important than the fact that there is no mechanism for her to become successful and

engaged again once she progresses too far down that slippery slope. In the case of most dropouts, “too far” may be as early as 9<sup>th</sup> grade, if the student is missing one or more course credits and has accumulated more than one semester grade of F in a core subject by the end of freshman year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). High school freshmen who fail to earn enough credits for promotion to tenth grade run a significantly increased risk of dropping out of high school (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg (2001) found that a difficult transition into high school, measured by the number of courses failed in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, was a significant predictor of dropout, even when they isolated the effect of this transition by controlling for academic, demographic, family, peer, and attitudinal factors of entering students. Based on analysis of data from 26 states, Haney (2000) predicted that seven out of every ten students retained in 9<sup>th</sup> grade would drop out of high school. Clearly, early course failure has a profound impact on the likelihood of high school graduation. We argue that recovery from this precarious position is rare exactly because the traditional high school structure of grading and credit accumulation provides no satisfactory avenue for such recovery.

The mechanism whereby students receive course credit, and the criteria for awarding credit, make it nearly impossible for students in what should be only “temporary failure” to recover from early credit deficiency. Students who wish to graduate in four years’ time must keep pace by accumulating a set portion of the total required credits each year. If they get “off track,” their misstep can be insurmountable. According to researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, students who fall off pace in their accumulation of Carnegie units in the first year of high school have tremendous difficulty trying to ever catch up again. System-wide, of Chicago Public

School students who were credit deficient at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade (missing more than one credit), only 15.6% were able to graduate in four years, as compared with 78% of students who had accumulated sufficient credits in their freshman year (Miller, Allensworth, & Kochanek, 2002). This confirms similar findings from earlier studies (Brown, 1993; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Brown (1993) noted that credits completed by 9<sup>th</sup> grade are a “fairly accurate predictor of graduation” (p. 8). The importance of credit accumulation prompted Marshall (2003) to identify 9<sup>th</sup> grade as “the pivotal year” in determining high school success or failure.

A large body of evidence on high school dropouts consistently implicates the Carnegie unit and its pivotal role in structuring high school success or failure. In Oregon, students leaving high school before graduation cited credit deficits more than any other single factor as their primary reason for dropping out of school (Oregon State Department of Education, 2000). King et al. (1988) reported similar findings in Ontario where the “vast majority of dropouts left school because they were so far behind in credit accumulation that the likelihood of graduation was too remote” (p. 3). Brown (1993) noted “a very distinct relationship between average credit accumulation and graduation” (p. 10). The high school graduates in his study had earned an average of 7 credits per year of attendance, as compared to earning an average of only 3 credits per year for students who left school without graduating.

When a high school student fails a required class, he generally has three options: (1) repeat the course in summer school, (2) repeat the course the following year or semester (in addition to a full load of new courses), or (3) attend night school to make up the credit (in addition to full-time day school). If a student fails two classes, the burden

doubles, and so on. A significant increase in student effort is one necessary condition for successful credit recovery, but oftentimes the reasons that led to the initial failure prevent the student from exerting the additional effort needed for recovery. In tracking the math coursework of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in the Chicago Public Schools, Allensworth (2006) found that almost a quarter of entering freshmen (23%) who took Algebra in fall of 2000 failed the first semester. The vast majority of the failing students also took Algebra in the spring semester, and close to three-fourths of them failed the second semester as well. Of all first-time freshmen who failed Algebra in the fall, only one out of every five enrolled in Algebra in summer school. Twenty-one percent of students in this 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort who initially attempted Algebra in the fall of freshman year still had not earned one full algebra credit by the end of their third semester of high school (midway through their second year).

Tracking the course-taking patterns of individual students in this way reveals the snowball effect of course failure. The student who emerges from a course having neither course credit nor the requisite knowledge to succeed at more advanced work is set up for subsequent failure. The more behind her peers the student gets, the more additional years she must invest if she ever hopes to graduate. As her high school graduation disappears into a receding horizon, her decision to drop out is the most likely outcome. Kurtz (1999) reported that “four out of five students who drop out do so in part because they are older than their peers” (n.p.). High school students are rational actors (Ericson & Ellett, 2002). Eventually they recognize that they are in a system of diminishing returns. As any wise educator knows, we have to provide students with multiple entry points into whatever it is we want to engage them. Students need repeated opportunities for access to success.

The traditional system is inherently punitive for high school students who need to make up missing credits, and puts many already marginal students at a considerable disadvantage for future success.

Recognizing that students need higher levels of achievement to compete for jobs in our 21<sup>st</sup> century economy (and that schools need to demonstrate higher levels of student achievement to make Adequate Yearly Progress under current federal mandates), many states have moved to “raise standards” for graduation, particularly in reading and math. In the classroom, this theoretically translates to increased performance expectations. But this can exacerbate an already dire situation. If schools and teachers hold higher standards in order to adequately prepare students for advanced coursework and eventual careers, and if those standards are enforced with the mechanisms of the traditional achievement model, the students who are academically ill-prepared to meet those standards will likely fall short and fail courses. On one hand, one could argue that students who have not sufficiently mastered the material in a course are not ready to move on to more demanding work, and should not be promoted. Failing a course, however, provides little encouragement to struggling students. In fact, it serves as a major disincentive to make further attempts at learning, particularly if students perceive that the system is rigged against them (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Diener & Dweck, 1978; Dweck & Licht, 1980).

When high schools across the country raised the number of courses required for graduation, some policy analysts predicted an increase in the dropout rate due to students unable to meet the more demanding academic requirements (Haney, 2000). The impact of such policies may well be less linear than that, however. While one study examining

the validity of this prediction found no relationship between higher math course requirements and high school dropout rates (Hoffer, 1997), it is impossible to know from the data presented if in fact the policy produced two opposite and off-setting effects. Policies requiring an increased number of course credits for graduation may well increase retention by allowing one subset of students to earn additional credits, making them more likely to be eligible to graduate, while simultaneously increasing dropouts among another subset of students who are unable to meet the higher course requirements. Studies elsewhere have found both of these individual effects. Higher high school graduation requirements in Chicago (e.g., a larger number of required credits) were shown to have a positive effect on high school completion primarily because students, by attempting and passing more classes, protected themselves against credit deficiency (Allensworth, 2005). Note that credit sufficiency or deficiency is the critical factor in determining whether or not the student graduates from high school.

### Summary

The traditional high school structure for determining final grades and awarding course credit calculates achievement as the amount learned in a fixed period of time. Educators have long recognized the problems associated with Carnegie units and time-limited learning. Previous attempts to address these problems at the classroom level, such as mastery learning and outcome-based education, have been successful in limited cases on a small scale but have not had a significant impact on changing existing concepts of academic progress or altering the established structures of student achievement. Proponents of mastery learning, for example, emphasize that mastery learning is primarily an instructional process focused on the selection and ordering of

instructional experiences (Guskey, 1997) rather than a structural change in the way achievement is measured, tracked or reported. Early attempts to individualize instruction, such as Carleton Washburne's Winnetka Plan<sup>9</sup> in the 1930s (Washburne, 1932), or more recent attempts to shift the focus from inputs to outputs, such as outcome-based education in the 1990s, did not make a significant impact on the reporting of student performance on any broad scale. These efforts fell short due to three general factors: (a) lack of a clear model for implementation compatible with the traditional structures of schooling, (b) lack of technology to support such a model on a large scale (Block, 1971), and (c) the mobilization of political forces hostile to the aims of the programs (Manno, 1994; Terry, 1996). Any reform positioned to alter the structure of student achievement on a broad scale would need to successfully negotiate these three hurdles of compatibility, technology, and politics.

Because the definition of the Carnegie unit requires that learning time be held constant, student achievement varies. The implications of the traditional structure of student achievement for urban high school students include the following.

For all students:

- no opportunity or incentive to improve performance after grades are issued;
- no mechanism for tracking or recording student progress relative to learning goals;
- no mechanism for recording student achievement of specific learning goals;

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<sup>9</sup> Recognizing the differential learning rates of children, Washburne advocated a system of individualized instruction that required teachers to list specific standards they wanted every child to master, administer diagnostic tests to determine each student's learning needs, and then provide self-instructive, self-corrective teaching materials tailored to each student's needs.

- lack of connection between classroom grades, state learning standards, and standardized accountability measures.

For students earning low C's and D's:

- credits accumulated even in the absence of substantive learning;
- high school diploma earned without requisite level of skills and knowledge;
- low grade point average threatens student's eligibility for colleges and financial scholarships.

For students earning F's:

- credit deficiency increases the likelihood of early leaving without a diploma;
- low grade point average threatens student's eligibility for colleges and financial scholarships if the student perseveres to graduation;
- official transcript permanently records failure.

Under this traditional model, a small proportion of students in urban schools do well, but significant numbers fail to graduate, and the majority of those who do graduate are inadequately prepared for college or the workplace. Certainly other factors impact student achievement in urban schools, such as the quality of teaching and instructional leadership, characteristics of school culture and organization, and the availability of effective instructional resources, among other factors. But even in a well-resourced classroom with a highly qualified teacher in a caring and challenging school environment, a heterogeneous group of students will be stratified in their achievement when learning time is held constant. Those who demonstrate achievement above a bare minimum level will be awarded course credit at the rate of one Carnegie unit per 120 hours of seat time, regardless of whether they have mastered requisite skills and content

knowledge. Those who are unable to meet minimum course requirements will be deficient in credits at the end of the year. Final letter grades will be communicated on report cards, permanently recorded on student transcripts, and calculated into grade point averages. External tests will be used to provide an evaluation of learning that mechanisms internal to the school seem unable to supply. This is how student achievement is currently structured in America's high schools.

Essential to this structure of student achievement in the traditional model is the function of sorting students for entry into higher education and the labor market. Indeed, the system was designed for these purposes a hundred years ago; form follows function. Structural mechanisms record student success and failure in order to make clear distinctions between students at different levels of achievement. The mechanism for awarding Carnegie units to successful students at the end of each semester creates distinct and largely fixed categories of those who are on- or off-track toward graduation as early as midway through freshman year. Structural mechanisms designed to differentiate students have become structural barriers to academic achievement for a significant number of students in urban high schools.

## THE YWLCS ACHIEVEMENT MODEL

### Contextual Framework

The Young Women's Leadership Charter School is a single-sex public charter school with a focus on math, science and technology – areas where women, and particularly women of color, are woefully underrepresented. The mission of YWLCS is to prepare Chicago Public School students for entry to and success in college, regardless of their incoming levels of achievement. By charter statute, any girl living in the city is

eligible to apply to the school. There are no academic entrance requirements; students are selected for admission by lottery. YWLCS opened in fall of 2000 with 75 students each in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, and plans to add incoming students at 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades annually. After the first two years, the school amended its original design by dropping the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. By the fourth year (2003-2004) YWLCS reached its total enrollment of approximately 325 students in grades 7 through 12 and had its first graduating class in June 2004.<sup>10</sup> The current student body is 72% African American, 18% Latina, 9% Caucasian, and 1% Asian, with 70% qualifying for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Approximately 15% of students are identified as having special educational needs. Stanford 9 test scores (fall 2000) from the initial high school class of 2004 showed entering students ranking in the 35<sup>th</sup> national percentile in math and 52<sup>nd</sup> percentile in reading. Incoming 6<sup>th</sup> graders in 2000 scored in the 44<sup>th</sup> percentile in math and the 43<sup>rd</sup> percentile in reading.

YWLCS received its charter in February of 2000. Prior to the opening of the school in August of 2000, the initial faculty and the two co-directors met to discuss the issue of student evaluation. As a charter school, we had wide latitude in our programs, policies, curriculum, and staffing. We knew that if we were to successfully prepare students for college, we would need to hold high standards in every class. We also knew it was likely that over half of our students would enter the school performing below grade level. If we enforced high standards with letter grades, we anticipated that under-prepared students would immediately earn D's and F's. We agreed, based on our previous experiences with the traditional achievement system, that grades motivated A

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<sup>10</sup> While most features of the YWLCS student evaluation system apply at all grade levels, we focus our attention on grades 9 through 12, where the issue of high school course credits becomes salient.

and B students, but had the opposite effect on students earning D's and F's. If we wanted under-prepared students to persevere and overcome deficits in their academic histories, we were not likely to accomplish that by issuing large numbers of failing grades. We also recognized that, in the traditional achievement system, students tended to show more interest in the grades they received than in the learning those grades were supposed to represent. We knew that grades were intended as proxies for knowledge, but actually it was the good grade that had real currency in the existing system. Grades, rather than learning, became the traditional basis of interactions between teacher and students or between teacher and parents. At the same time, traditional letter grades were wholly inadequate for providing the level of detailed feedback that our students would need if they were to monitor their own learning relative to set goals. We read and discussed some of the current literature on grading practices to more fully inform our work (e.g., Kohn, 1993; Marzano, 2000).

The faculty and administrators at YWLCS set out to devise a system of student evaluation that would use a variety of measures of student learning, provide meaningful feedback to students and their families, motivate students to achieve and persevere, track student progress over time, raise expectations as students built skills, and allow students to accumulate knowledge at varying rates of speed without penalty. We also wanted to center conversation on learning rather than on marks or grades; our system of student evaluation had to make assessment visible, explicit, and social. To accomplish these objectives, we knew we had to create something very different from the traditional approach to student evaluation. At the same time, we recognized that the African-American and Latino families we hoped to serve were looking for a good school for their

children; they were not looking to participate in a grand experiment. To be seen as legitimate by these families, we could not stray too far from their expected notions of “school” (Parsons, 1960; Scott, 1995). As one school in a large public system, we also needed to comply with certain standardized practices at points where our school interacted with other institutions. Specifically, to achieve our mission of preparing and sending students to college, we needed to produce transcripts that provided usable information to colleges for admissions decisions (and that other high schools could interpret if students transferred out of YWLCS prior to graduation). These external expectations required us to utilize some common structural mechanisms, such as maintaining distinctions between students along traditional grade levels (freshmen, sophomores, etc.), dividing our school day into multiple class periods focused on traditional disciplines, awarding standard credits for successfully completed courses, creating high school transcripts, and issuing report cards with parent/teacher conferences regularly throughout the year.

While the YWLCS model looks familiar at important points of interface with external systems, constituents, or institutions, the underlying philosophy and essential components of student evaluation are fundamentally different. The two key structural differences are these: (a) Student achievement is based on demonstrated proficiency in course outcomes, regardless of time; and (b) Student records always reflect the student’s best work to date, rather than preserving snapshots of past failure or inadequacy.

### Structural Components

Mirroring our earlier presentation of the traditional high school model of student evaluation, in this next section we focus on the structure of student achievement in the

YWLCS model. The model's key components are academic outcomes; proficiency ratings and rating changes on outcomes; proficiency level in courses; course credit and transcripts; cumulative proficiency percentages across courses; report cards; grade point equivalents; an online evaluation database; and evaluation data reports. We first describe each component and explicate its function and implications for underachieving students in urban high schools. Following these descriptions we address the case of special needs students and the ways the system allows for various modifications and accommodations.

### *Academic Outcomes*

An academic outcome is a learning objective specifying a skill or concept that the student is expected to learn in a course through her participation in planned instructional activities. Academic outcomes should be articulated so that they are clear to students and parents, measurable by the teacher, and achievable by most students in a trimester's time. A one-credit course will have approximately 10 academic outcomes per trimester (a 12-week period), or 30 a year. Outcomes are not synonymous with assignments. Rather, assignments, projects, writing activities, tests and quizzes are organized opportunities for students to learn specific skills or content and demonstrate their developing proficiencies as articulated in course outcomes. Table 1 lists examples of course outcomes for a variety of subject matters. Individual teachers initially articulated their own set of course outcomes for the classes they taught. As the school expanded to include multiple teachers within each content area, these content area teams worked together to articulate a logical progression of course outcomes from one class to the next.

Table 1  
Sample Outcomes

Course	Grade Level	Text of Outcomes
Humanities	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- List and describe pros and cons for four distinct forms of government.</li> <li>- Analyze a literary text using these literary elements: character, setting, figurative language, and symbolism.</li> </ul>
Math	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create and interpret algebraic expressions using variables.</li> <li>- Use data in tables and graphs to make predictions and estimates.</li> </ul>
Technology	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create multi-page story with pictures, text, LOGO shapes, and animation in Microworlds Pro.</li> <li>- Create animation of basic shapes by using Flash MX animation tools.</li> </ul>
Biology	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describe and model the genetic processes of transcription and translation.</li> <li>- Compare and contrast the structures of prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells.</li> </ul>
Art	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Demonstrate processes and tools used for creating hand-built ceramics.</li> <li>- Explain the color wheel, including complementary and analogous colors.</li> </ul>
College Composition	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify the rules of parallelism and apply them to written assignments.</li> <li>- Correctly use quotes and parenthetical citations in MLA format.</li> </ul>

*Proficiency Ratings and Rating Changes on Outcomes*

At the end of an instructional sequence, the teacher rates each student on each outcome addressed in the sequence, using a three-tiered rating system. Students can meet an outcome at a *Proficient* or a *High Performance* level. In rating a student as *Proficient* on an outcome, the teacher is in effect certifying that the student has reliably demonstrated through multiple pieces of evidence that she knows the content or is able to

perform the skill described in the outcome. *High Performance* indicates a level of achievement “above and beyond” the teacher’s expectations for proficiency. *High Performance* generally indicates a qualitative difference (better) rather than a quantitative difference (more). Students who still have not met an outcome at the end of an instructional sequence are rated as *Not Yet*. A *Not Yet* rating means that the teacher did not have enough reliable evidence of proficiency, either because evidence was missing (student did not complete work) or because the student’s available work revealed continued misconceptions or errors or an inadequate level of understanding or skill.

Once a teacher has rated students on an outcome, a student with a *Not Yet* rating can do additional work to provide evidence of proficiency. When the teacher is satisfied through multiple pieces of evidence that the student understands the material or can reliably demonstrate the skill in question, the teacher will change the original rating from *Not Yet* to *Proficient* or, depending on the student’s quality of work and depth of understanding, to *High Performance*. While a teacher can set deadlines for given assignments, outcomes themselves do not have deadlines. At any point while the student is still actively enrolled in the school, she can do further work on past outcomes, even for outcomes that previous teachers originally assessed and rated in previous years. The only time a student’s record becomes permanent and immutable is upon her graduation (or transfer) from the school.

Teachers place great emphasis on encouraging students to make up *Not Yet* outcomes while they are still enrolled in a course (i.e., before June). In this case the teacher already has evidence of the student’s work to date and of the reasons the student received the *Not Yet* rating. The teacher can readily make suggestions of additional work

the student can do to demonstrate her learning. Inevitably, however, some students leave outcomes unmet while enrolled in a course, and then return to them in a subsequent year. While in the ideal case each teacher would keep records and files with each student's work so that a student revisiting an unmet outcome from a prior year would have access to this evidence of her previous learning, in reality such records are not always available. Without evidence of past work, a teacher has two options when working with a student trying to meet a past outcome rated as *Not Yet*. Oftentimes a student will come to her current teacher to make up an outcome from a previous teacher in the same subject area. In this case, the current teacher often uses the student's current work to assess her understanding of the outcome. For example, in Table 1 above, one of the 9th grade math outcomes is to "Use data in tables and graphs to make predictions and estimates." This is a skill initially taught and evaluated in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but students continue to use and develop this skill throughout high school. If an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student was rated as *Not Yet* in this 9<sup>th</sup> grade outcome, her 11<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher can use her current work with tables and graphs to re-assess the student's skill and change her rating on the outcome. If the outcome focuses on content knowledge that is not repeated in subsequent years – for example, the biology outcome "Compare and contrast the structures of prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells" – then the student needs to see the biology teacher to make up this outcome. Perhaps there is a new biology teacher with no record of this student's previous work. In this case, the student and teacher negotiate a way to assess the student's current understanding and to demonstrate evidence of her knowledge sufficient to meet the outcome (perhaps by completing work from the current biology class). In all cases, the

student is the one responsible for seeking out the teacher and entering into a dialogue about how best to demonstrate her proficiency.

### *Proficiency Level in Courses*

In order to pass a course, a student needs to meet 70% of the outcomes in that course. In other words, if a year-long course has 30 outcomes, a student needs to demonstrate proficiency in at least 21 of those 30 outcomes. Proficiency in individual outcomes can be demonstrated at either a *Proficient* or a *High Performance* level. Regardless of the grade level of the student or the type of course, the minimum proficiency level for each course is the same. Students must meet 70% of the course outcomes to pass any course.

### *Course credit and Transcripts*

Each student's transcript is the official record of her course-taking and academic achievement. The transcript displays the course titles for all the student's past and current courses, also indicating the department, course number, and course year for each. A column on the transcript displays the percentage of outcomes the student has currently met in each course. As soon as teachers begin rating their Trimester 1 outcomes, these percentages are also displayed for courses in which the student is currently enrolled. [A sample YWLCS transcript is included in the Appendix.] As the teacher evaluates new outcomes or changes ratings on previously evaluated outcomes, these percentages change accordingly.

At the end of the academic year, if the student has met at least 70% of the outcomes in a course, she is automatically awarded credit for that course on her transcript. If she has not yet met the minimum proficiency level of 70% when the course

ends in June, her transcript still lists the course and her current proficiency percentage in the course, but displays a zero in the credit column. As soon as the student does additional work sufficient to satisfy 70% of the course outcomes, and her teacher updates her ratings on those outcomes from *Not Yet* to *Proficient* or better, course credit is awarded retroactively on the student's transcript. Hence, transcripts are real-time records of student achievement to date in each course. Students can continue to work for this retroactive course credit, as necessary, for any course they took over their high school tenure until they graduate. Indeed, senior year is not uncommonly the time when students are fully motivated to revisit past material and do the learning work necessary to meet old outcomes in order to earn the final credits they need to graduate. Students are prevented from procrastinating too much, however, by strict promotion requirements which include a minimum number of credits a student must earn each year. To move from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, a student needs to have earned at least 6 credits. To move from 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the minimum credit requirement is 12 credits, and so on (see Table 2). If a student gets to the end of a school year without the requisite number of credits required for promotion to the next grade level, she is enrolled in summer school to focus on unmet outcomes that will help her to earn the necessary credits to move forward. Currently, YWLCS students need 26 credits to graduate, a number slightly higher than that required in regular CPS high schools.

#### *Cumulative Proficiency Percentage across Courses*

In addition to the proficiency level for each course (demonstrated proficiency in 70% of outcomes within a course), transcript records also keep track of the student's cumulative proficiency percentage across courses. This cumulative indicator tracks the

percentage of total outcomes, from all courses taken in high school, that the student has met at a level of *Proficient* or better. Unlike the proficiency level of 70% required to pass each course, the cumulative proficiency percentage required for promotion goes up by 5% a year as a student progresses from one grade level to the next (see Table 2). The combination of credit requirements and the cumulative proficiency percentage requirement determines promotion to the next grade. To be promoted from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, a student’s cumulative proficiency percentage has to be at least 70%. To be promoted out of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the cumulative requirement goes up to 75%, and so on.

Table 2  
Promotion and Graduation Requirements

Promotion Level	Credit Requirement	Cumulative Proficiency % Requirement
9 <sup>th</sup> grade to 10 <sup>th</sup> grade	6	70
10 <sup>th</sup> grade to 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	12	75
11 <sup>th</sup> grade to 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	18	80
Required to Graduate	26 <sup>a</sup>	85

<sup>a</sup> Credits required for graduation must be distributed across disciplines, e.g., a minimum of 3 credits in math, 3 credits in science, 6 credits in humanities, etc.

Ultimately, to graduate from YWLCS, a student has to have passed 85% of all course outcomes she encountered in high school at a *Proficient* level or better. This is a much higher standard for graduation than exists in the traditional system, where students can earn course credits with low grades and without adequate proficiency in the course content.

The rationale for increasing the required level of achievement over time is an assumption that not all students come into high school ready for rigorous academic work, whether because of inadequate preparation in elementary school, limited maturity, difficult life circumstances, or other factors. While it is important upon their entrance to high school to immerse students in a challenging and stimulating academic environment and to communicate high expectations of them, school policies must also recognize that academic achievement is a developmental process. The structure of achievement in the YWLCS model is built on the notion that success breeds success. As students develop their capacity to meet reasonable expectations and build foundational academic skills, we raise the level of expected performance by increasing the requirements for promotion. Because the increases in expectations are incremental, they are always attainable. At no point is a student labeled a failure. She always just needs to stretch a little more to grasp something positioned within her reach.

All students occupy one of four levels of Academic Standing at any point in time, based on their cumulative proficiency percentage relative to their grade level. Beginning at entrance to a new grade level, any student whose cumulative proficiency is not high enough to promote her *out* of that grade level is considered “Not Yet Proficient.” For example, a student with a cumulative proficiency of 73% in October of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year is “Not Yet Proficient” because she needs to raise that to 75% in order to be promoted in June. Thus, students who are achieving at a bare threshold level have ongoing pressure to keep working a little harder. The goal is for everyone to clear the hurdle for promotion as early in the school year as possible. As soon as the hypothetical student above raises her cumulative proficiency to 75% (by increasing the percentage of

outcomes she is meeting in her current classes and/or by doing additional work on *Not Yet* outcomes from previous courses to demonstrate proficiency), she is considered “Proficient” in her Academic Standing.

For high-achieving students, the cumulative proficiency percentage helps to qualify them for “Honors” or “High Honors” standing. Honors categories are mathematically determined by the students’ cumulative proficiency percentage and the percent of outcomes they have met at a *High Performance* level. The possibility of “Honors” or “High Honors” standing meets the needs of students motivated by A’s and B’s in a traditional letter-grade system. Our top students compete with each other for the highest cumulative proficiency percentage and Academic Standing as “High Honors” students<sup>11</sup>. It is important to note however, unlike grade point average in the traditional system where early failure precludes future success, *any* student in YWLCS can work her way onto the honor roll, regardless of early low achievement. As students address their past *Not Yets* and improve their performance in current classes, their cumulative proficiency percentage continues to rise.

### *Report Cards*

In keeping with common practice, YWLCS issues report cards at regular intervals. Report cards are generally distributed to parents in conjunction with parent/teacher conferences at the end of each trimester. Report cards are multi-page documents that include a first summary page followed by individual pages for each class. The summary page lists current courses along with the student’s proficiency percentage in each course. The student’s cumulative proficiency percentage and Academic Standing

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<sup>11</sup> Our practice, when multiple seniors have earned top spots based on cumulative proficiency percentage, is to have multiple valedictorians at graduation.

also appear on the summary page. Following the summary page are individual pages for each course. A course page lists the course title, teacher name, and a brief description of the course content and main instructional activities or assignments during the trimester. All of the trimester outcomes are listed, followed by the student's rating in each outcome. At the bottom of the page the teacher includes a short narrative evaluation of the student's work in that trimester. Note that, because student achievement is treated as dynamic in the YWLCS model, report cards present data that are accurate as of the date of printing. [A sample report card is included in the Appendix.]

### *Grade Point Equivalents*

For the first three years of the school, while our inaugural class moved from freshman to sophomore to junior year, as designers of the system we swore we would never succumb to converting student achievement to a grade point average. When this first cohort began applying for colleges and scholarships that required students to state a GPA, however, we had to compromise. We devised a conversion formula that used the same data used to determine honors standing – cumulative proficiency percentage and percent of *High Performance* ratings – to calculate a “grade point equivalent” reported on a 4-point scale. It is important to note that this grade point equivalent has no internal relevance; the only place it appears is on a student's official transcript when an outside institution requests that document.

### Special Needs Students

The YWLCS system of student evaluation includes all students with special educational needs. All of the components of the system apply equally to special needs students: they must meet 70% of course outcomes to pass a course, they must meet the

cumulative proficiency percentage for their grade level to be promoted, and they qualify for honor roll and high honors on the same basis as regular education students. Within the student evaluation system, the only point of modification is at the level of outcomes.<sup>12</sup> The regular education teacher, in consultation with the special education teacher servicing a particular student, has the option to either leave a particular outcome *unrated*, in which case the student is not held accountable for meeting that outcome, or the teacher can modify an outcome directly, and use the modified outcome to rate the student's performance. Referring again to the outcomes on Table 1, a teacher may modify the humanities outcome, "List and describe pros and cons for four distinct forms of government," to only require the student to list and describe two forms of government. When entering student ratings, the teacher would rate all the regular education students on the original outcome, but would rate the special education student on the modified outcome. This puts special needs students on an equal footing to pass classes, get promoted to the next grade level, and make honor roll within the school-wide student evaluation system.

### Comparison of Structural Components

The traditional structure of achievement in American high schools is premised on very different philosophical assumptions and built for different purposes than is the structure of achievement in the YWLCS model. While ultimately it is the philosophy of education they each reveal that is most important, in fact this paper focuses on the ways in which the traditional system creates structural barriers to achievement. For that reason,

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<sup>12</sup> Teachers also modify instruction or assignments for special needs students, and make assessment modifications such as allowing additional time on tests, etc., according to students' Individual Education Plans (IEPs). The structural components of the overall system, however, apply equally to special education students as to regular education students.

Table 3

## Comparison of Structural Components of Two Systems of Student Evaluation

	<b>Traditional System</b>	<b>YWLCS System</b>
Unit of Assessment	Letter grade (A, B, C, D, F)	Proficiency ratings (High Performance, Proficient, Not Yet Proficient)
Basis of Assessment	Entire course content	Specific course outcomes
Academic Calendar Structure	2 semesters + summer school	3 trimesters + summer school
Formal Reporting of Student Achievement	Grade reports each quarter, permanently recorded at end of each semester	Grade reports each trimester, ongoing real-time updates of progress
Unit of Course Credit	Carnegie Unit	Credit unit
Basis of Unit for Course Credit	Seat time, as measured by standard Carnegie unit (120 hrs = 1 credit). Learning, as measured by grade of D- or above	Learning, as measured by % of course outcomes met (proficiency in 70% of outcomes = 1 credit)
Minimum Passing Performance	Grade of D- or above	Demonstrated proficiency in at least 70% of course outcomes
Point in Time for Awarding Course Credit	End of semester in which course was taken	End of school year in which course was taken, or credit awarded retroactively for past courses once student meets 70% of course outcomes
Transcript/Student Record	Permanent record of point-in-time achievement in each course	Dynamic record of best achievement to date in each course
Quantitative Achievement Measure on 4-Point Scale	Grade Point Average (GPA)	Grade Point Equivalent (GPE)
Basis of Quantitative Measure	Letter grades converted to 4-point scale, averaged for all high school courses	Formula based on total % of outcomes achieved and % of High Performance rankings
Criteria for Promotion to Next Grade	Carnegie units earned	Credit units earned plus cumulative proficiency percentage across all classes

we focus our discussion on structural issues. Table 3 compares the structural components of the traditional model and the YWLCS system of student evaluation for each of several points of comparison.

#### *Online Evaluation Database*

The key tool that allows the YWLCS student evaluation system to function is the database that supports it. Peggy Baker of Database Designs created the database system for YWLCS and continues to be the primary technical support for our school and the four other schools who are now using this model. Originally, outcome data were entered and stored on an Access database. In 2002 Database Designs created EASE (Equity and Access in Student Evaluation) ©, a web interface for the student evaluation system that allows us to create secure individual accounts for all students, parents, and teachers so they can check on student progress from any computer terminal with Internet access. Students and parents are now able to view and print: (a) a graphical display of the student's current performance in current classes, (b) a listing of current outcomes for current classes, (c) an unofficial transcript, and (d) a listing by department of all outcomes from current and past courses on which the student received a *Not Yet* rating. Students refer to this last item as their *Not Yet* list. Because students can easily access their own *Not Yet* list in school or at home, they can be proactive in addressing their unmet outcomes. While each student has a faculty advisor that she sees on a daily basis, and while faculty advisors regularly monitor their advisees' performance and do their share of cajoling, the ultimate responsibility for making up *Not Yets* rests with the individual student. This involves the student being aware of the outcomes she needs to address, making a plan for working on unmet outcomes, contacting her teacher(s) to find

out how she can work on past outcomes and what kinds of evidence of proficiency she needs to supply, following through on completing work and turning it in, and monitoring her progress as teachers update outcome ratings based on the additional evidence the student supplies.

The evaluation database allows the teacher to (a) check on the academic progress of his or her advisory students (with screens similar to those accessible to individual students and parents); (b) rate current students on the teacher's own current course outcomes; (c) see the *Not Yet* list for each current student from past classes in the teacher's content area (e.g., the sophomore math teacher can look at his student's freshman math *Not Yets*); (d) change past or current students' outcome ratings from the teacher's own or other teachers' courses; and (e) enter course descriptions and narrative evaluations for report cards. Teachers are able to perform any of these functions from any Internet-accessible computer terminal. When a teacher enters student achievement data into the system, the updated transcript, current standing, cumulative proficiency percentage, *Not Yet* list, etc., appear the following day. [Samples of screen shots from the Student Evaluation web interface are included in the Appendix.]

#### *Evaluation Data Reports*

In addition to tracking and calculating student-level data, the evaluation database allows teachers and school administrators to use student achievement data to directly inform instruction and plan supplemental services. For example, at the end of a curriculum unit during which a teacher assessed and rated multiple outcomes, he or she can query the database to find out the number of students rated as *Not Yet* on each outcome. The teacher can then decide whether to re-teach certain content to the whole

class or to target particular students for remediation (by getting the list of students with *Not Yet* on the related outcomes from the database).

Similarly, teachers can offer supplementary Saturday or after-school “mini-courses” built around a particular group of rated outcomes. The teacher can select three or four outcomes that could reasonably be combined into a small instructional unit, query the database for a listing of all students currently enrolled in the school who have *Not Yets* in one or more of those outcomes, and then invite those students to participate in the mini-course. Mini-courses can be designed in whatever configuration best supports students to learn the material: one three-hour session on a Saturday morning, a series of three consecutive Saturdays, or every Tuesday after school for six weeks.<sup>13</sup> Students are motivated to participate because it gives them another opportunity to learn material they didn’t fully understand the first time around in order to earn course credit and raise their cumulative proficiency percentages while building skills and knowledge.

Summer school courses at YWLCS are similarly designed to target the particular content area deficits or skill deficits of attending students. When a student has below the required 70% proficiency in a course at the end of the school year in June, the student is referred for summer school. Traditionally, high schools try to either cram in as much of a semester’s course content as possible into a six-week summer school class or, recognizing the futility of attempting to teach comprehensively in six weeks what was covered in the previous six months, they teach just an abbreviated sampling of course content. Unfortunately, the teachers teaching summer school courses have no way of knowing which parts of the course content the summer school students already learned,

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<sup>13</sup> YWLCS teachers are paid a stipend for teaching Saturday classes.

and which parts they had not learned, because schools don't traditionally collect that level of achievement data. So the summer school teacher just has to take a shot in the dark.

In contrast, YWLCS teachers know exactly what summer school students still need to learn from the previous year's course, and they can plan summer instruction accordingly. For example, an 11<sup>th</sup> grade humanities course covers a broad range of content in a year, including a unit on literary analysis based on two novels, a unit on American colonial history and the Revolutionary War, and a unit on the U. S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Throughout the year students also write several essays, focusing both on the content they are studying and on grammar and mechanics. Each unit in the curriculum has a cluster of outcomes associated with it, and the course also includes outcomes related to grammar and writing. At the end of the year, once all outcome ratings have been entered, the teacher can query the database to find which outcomes in the course have the largest number of students with *Not Yet* ratings. The teacher can then group together related outcomes from that query and generate lists of students who have not yet met outcomes in that group. The teacher then plans the summer school curriculum for these students around these outcomes. Perhaps the focus of her summer school class in Week One will be on literary analysis. Only students who have *Not Yets* in outcomes related to literary analysis will be required to attend Week One. Students with *Not Yets* in colonial history are invited to come to Week Two, and so on. Because the database contains a record of exactly which skills or content knowledge each student needs, teachers can target their instruction to directly meet those needs.

In summer 2004, 81 YWLCS students attended summer school, representing 23% of the total student body in grades 7-12. The percentage of high school student attendees

was slightly higher at 28% (Rempert, 2004). Of high school participants, the percentage who raised their proficiency level to 70% in summer school and earned retroactive course credit ranged from 46% to 88% of students in a course, depending on the course.

Overall, 56 students increased individual course averages to 70% or above during summer school, which accounted for 78% of courses taken in summer school (Rempert, 2004).

The detailed level of student achievement data collected in the YWLCS student evaluation system allows teachers and administrators to target resources to students' demonstrated academic needs. Teachers know what skills and knowledge each student has demonstrated and what each student still needs to demonstrate, and can tailor their classroom instruction to address those identified needs, or they can offer remedial instruction to targeted groups of students outside of class. Rather than recording letter grades to represent some particular designation of overall learning, teachers keep instructionally useful data on specific student achievement. The indicators of student achievement – proficiency percentages in and across courses and accumulated course credits – are direct records of what a student knows and is able to do. As the student learns more and demonstrates her new learning, her percentages and accumulated credits go up. She and her parents immediately see the results of her efforts. Her past mistakes or academic struggles are erased by *learning more*, and replaced by evidence of success.

#### The YWLCS Model and College Admissions

While the YWLCS student evaluation system structures student achievement in a fundamentally different way than the traditional high school system, it is crucial that the model be able to interface effectively with external systems such as college admissions

offices. To this end, YWLCS students earn course credits, have transcripts, and can report grade point equivalencies. In addition, the school has done extensive work to educate college and university admissions officers about its system of student evaluation and to make sure they understand how to read a YWLCS transcript. Admissions personnel have given the school high praise for its system and are able to use the data it provides to make well-informed admissions decisions. With the first graduating class, state colleges and universities requested that YWLCS translate its outcome ratings into a grade point equivalency, which now appears as a standard feature on the official transcript. To date, over 95% of YWLCS graduates have been admitted to college by over 40 post-secondary institutions, both public and private, in state and across the country. While the mission of the school is to graduate well-prepared students and send them to college, we know that the national data on post-secondary retention, particularly for urban students of color, is bleak at best. We believe the true test of success will come in 2009, when the first graduating class of 2004 has had five years to complete their bachelor's degrees. Currently, over 85% of that initial cohort is still enrolled in college as sophomores in 2005-2006.<sup>14</sup> We hope to demonstrate, in our own mini- Eight Year Study, that schools do not have to be configured around a hundred-year-old model of seat time and Carnegie units in order to prepare students for admission to and success in college.

### Implications for School Organization

Changing the structure of achievement in a school requires concomitant changes in other aspects of school organization as well. In the last six years at YWLCS, we have found that the system of student evaluation impacts our need for ongoing professional

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<sup>14</sup> These figures are based on internal data in tracking our own students through their post-secondary years.

development around assessment practices, backward instructional design, and the technical use of the database and web interface. We must also designate time for content area teams to regularly review outcomes, collectively assess student work, and re-align curriculum or instruction based on those data. To this end, YWLCS teacher contracts include three to four weeks of paid professional development time in the summer, focused on planning and new teacher orientation in August and year-end evaluation and goal setting in June. Throughout the school year we devote two-and-a-half hours each Wednesday afternoon and one full Friday each month to school-wide professional development, with content area teams meeting biweekly.

In addition to its implications for professional development, the student evaluation system requires that time be utilized for remediation of students who have not yet met course outcomes. Currently, YWLCS teachers hold after-school Academic Workshops for one hour twice a week for students to get individual help on current course work or past *Not Yets*. The school is also open for five hours every Saturday for students to use the computer lab or get additional tutoring. Teachers are paid a stipend for working with students during “Saturday School,” and volunteer tutors are also available on Saturdays. In addition to these extra work times, students also receive support from their participation in daily Advisory. Each teacher has an Advisory of approximately 15 students with whom he or she meets every day for 30 minutes. The advisor’s role is to provide academic support to advisees and to act as the liaison between school and family. Advisors monitor their advisees’ transcripts and their status in current classes and help them develop and follow through on plans to address their *Not Yets*.

At the beginning of this section we laid out our criteria for creating an alternative system of student evaluation. Table 4 revisits those criteria (referred to in the table as functions), along with the structural mechanisms (forms) we designed into the system to meet each criterion.

### Conclusion

High schools in America are largely structured by a 100-year-old philosophy that paced instruction and defined achievement such that only the best and the brightest would endure to graduate. As social expectations and economic demands have shifted over time, making it necessary for all young people to complete high school with adequate preparation for further education, this traditional structure has become a barrier to academic achievement in secondary schools. In an era of standards-based accountability, high schools do not have internal systems in place to track or report student achievement as defined by the development of specific skills and content knowledge. The structures that do exist are punitive to students who do not get it right the first time, and create barriers for their recovery of academic success.

The YWLCS system of student evaluation provides an alternative model. By recognizing that academic achievement is a developmental process, this model structures student achievement so that all students can reach their highest potential. Form follows function. Rather than presenting a series of point-in-time snapshots of student performance, often preserving evidence of failure, the YWLCS model captures a student's best efforts to date. While students can and do get "off track" in this system, falling behind in accumulated credits and requisite knowledge and skills, the system is inherently forgiving, not only allowing but structuring the opportunity for students to

Table 4

Form and Function of Structural Components of the YWLCS Student Evaluation System

Function	Form
Use a variety of measures of student learning	Multiple opportunities and modalities to demonstrate proficiency in an outcome
Provide meaningful feedback to students and their families	Rating on each course outcome; narrative evaluation each trimester from every teacher
Allow students to accumulate knowledge at varying rates of speed without penalty	Students can provide additional evidence of learning on outcomes previously rated as <i>Not Yet</i> and teacher will change the student’s rating
Motivate students to achieve and persevere	Emphasis on “not yet” rather than failure; Ongoing opportunity to increase level of performance on previously rated outcomes
Track student progress over time	Electronic record of initial outcome rating and subsequent changes in rating
Raise expectations as students build skills	Annually increasing minimum proficiency levels for promotion to next grade on cumulative proficiency percentage
Center the conversations around learning rather than around marks or grades	Teachers identify outcomes in beginning of each course, refer to outcomes throughout trimester as goals of instruction, ask student, “What do you know? What is your evidence?” as basis of conversation on student’s performance in class
Make assessment visible, explicit, and social	Clearly articulated outcomes at onset of course; provide rubrics for assignments; negotiate outcomes for each course with Content Area Team colleagues

catch up with their peers en route to graduation. We built the YWLCS system on our belief that evaluation within the context of schools should be informative rather than punitive, structured to motivate further learning rather than to limit future options. Schools should serve to develop student capacity and perseverance, preparing students not only to function effectively in challenging environments and participate fully in a

democratic society, but also to advocate for themselves and to transcend traditional barriers. The role of the schools should not be to punish students for failure, to cast judgment on the worthy versus the unworthy learner, or to determine each person's rightful "place" in the social or economic order. Neither should schools be gatekeepers, sorting students so that colleges and employers can take their pick of the certified "best." Rather than reproducing racial and economic inequalities and calling them an "achievement gap," schools can be a corrective force by carefully building equity and access into the structure of student achievement. The focus of teachers and students belongs on teaching and learning, and public school systems should ensure that structural mechanisms support teaching and learning rather than impede them. The heart of the teacher-student conversation should always be, "What do you know about this? How can you show me what you know?" and "How can you learn more?" To those ends, we created the system of student evaluation presented in this paper. The YWLCS system offers one model for addressing and overcoming major structural barriers to academic achievement inherent in the traditional system. But is such a model positioned to significantly alter the structure of student achievement on a broad scale? Earlier attempts to reform the traditional time-based learning structure of high schools succeeded in having only local, temporary impacts. Can this alternative model successfully negotiate the three hurdles of compatibility, technology, and politics to facilitate major reform?

As for its compatibility, at key points of contact with external systems the YWLCS model mimics traditional structures of credits, transcripts, and GPA. Traditional curricular divisions, familiar daily schedules, set marking periods and regular report cards reassure families and the community of the "normalcy" of most aspects of the school.

The model is flexible enough to fit the varying organizational needs of the five schools currently using it. Three are regular district “schools-within-a-school,” one is a public alternative high school, and YWLCS is a public charter school. Each of these schools is able to tailor features of the system to match the demands of the external environment in which it operates. For example, students in the Ohio school receive both a regular district report card and an outcome-based report card. Letter grades on the regular report card are calculated based on student proficiency levels on course outcomes. Regular district schools in Chicago have successfully negotiated permission to avoid issuing letter grades at all until one year after a course is completed, thus allowing students a year’s time to make up *Not Yets*. A wide degree of variation is possible while maintaining the philosophical and structural integrity of this alternative system.

Earlier reform efforts in the last century, such as Washburne’s plan for individualized instruction, were curtailed by an absence of technology necessary to support a detailed tracking of student achievement. The rapid development of computer technology and electronic storage capacity makes it possible to track volumes of student outcome data and to organize student data to be instructionally useful. YWLCS currently hosts on its network server the student evaluation systems of all five schools using this model at rates affordable to small, urban, public schools. The technology is readily available to support a similar low-cost system in every high school in America.

The question remains as to the political viability of the YWLCS model. Outcome-based education, which shares many of the same basic tenets and structures as the YWLCS system, had widespread but short-lived impact on school districts across the country in the 1980s and ‘90s. Conservatives who initially heralded its focus on

accountability eventually torpedoed the movement over concerns about the affective bent of student outcomes (Kearney, 1994; Manno, 1994; Schrag, 1995). The YWLCS model itself is agnostic as to *what* a student should learn. Educators, parents, school board members, and the local community can and should decide on appropriate learning outcomes for their children. The school in Ohio now using this system created outcomes directly from the Ohio state content standards. Technically, a school could also choose “competencies” or “habits of mind” rather than content knowledge and discrete skills as the basis for specifying course outcomes. Determining what students ought to learn is a political, cultural, and social question as much as it is an educational one. Tracking whether or not they have learned it is a structural question. Governors, federal officials, educators, researchers, foundations, all are calling for major restructuring of the American high school (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2002; National Governors Association, 2004; Pear, 2005). The national trend in education is to hold states, districts, schools, teachers and students accountable for learning outcomes; but within traditional high schools themselves, there is no structure for determining what the important outcomes ought to be, or whether students are meeting them. Never before has widespread adoption of standards as the primary reform lever for public education been combined with the political will to restructure high schools. The YWLCS system of student evaluation provides a viable model and technological tool to restructure student achievement in American high schools aligned with standards-based reform. Much of the debate over standards and accountability measures has centered on concerns about the potentially punitive nature of such policies and their effects on marginal students. By providing structural mechanisms

for urban students to regain their academic footing after early school failure, in fact by eliminating course “failure” from the high school lexicon, the YWLCS system of student evaluation offers a structural model that equips schools to better support vulnerable youth to achieve academic success, build skills and knowledge, and graduate from high school prepared for the future.

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## Authors' Note

Camille A. Farrington, College of Education, University of Illinois, Chicago;  
Margaret H. Small, Young Women's Leadership Charter School, Chicago, Illinois.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Camille Farrington, E-mail: [cfarring@ywcls.org](mailto:cfarring@ywcls.org) or Margaret Small, E-mail: [msmall@ywcls.org](mailto:msmall@ywcls.org).

Appendix

Detailed  
academic  
report  
(report card)

<b>Student Profile: Michaela Crowder (Advisory 402)</b>	
<b>Course</b> Using Graphic Design-460-09-3-02-03	1301
<b>Course Learning Behavior s</b>	
Demonstrates analytical thinking by asking thoughtful questions.	<u>High Performance</u>
Listens carefully to others, focuses her attention in class, and participates actively in discussions	<u>High Performance</u>
Works productively and participates effectively in group activities regardless of varying group dynamics	<u>High Performance</u>
<b>Course Academic Outcomes</b>	
Demonstrate the ability to keep a well-maintained portfolio of her work.	<u>Not Yet</u>
Tech11/03 tri3.1 Demonstrates the ability to use the toolbox, status bar, palettes, and commands of Photoshop 7 independently.	<u>Proficient</u>
Tech11/03 tri3.2 Demonstrates a comprehensive understanding and usage of art making materials and technologies.	<u>Not Yet</u>
Tech11/03 tri3.3 Demonstrates the ability to develop innovative ways to use the potential of traditional tools, different media, techniques, processes and modern technologies used in the arts.	<u>Proficient</u>
Tech11/03 tri3.4 Demonstrates the ability to apply the skills and knowledge necessary to create complex works of art, using computer generated images that convey the organizational principles and expressive qualities that give meaning to a work of art.	<u>Proficient</u>
Tech11/03 tri3.5 Demonstrates the ability to reflect upon and assess the characteristics and merits of her work and the work of others, by participating actively in group and individual critiques.	<u>Not Yet</u>
<hr/>	
<i>Comments and Signatures:</i>	<i>Michaela's performance in class was consistent. Even though I saw her working on all her assignments in and out of class, I did not see some of them in her portfolio. Since those assignments (in-class: Human Rights) was not in her portfolio I was not able to assess it accordingly.</i>
<i>Teacher Signature</i>	<i>Michaela also needs to complete her self-assessment and class evaluation and she needs to work on completing her portfolio.</i>
<hr/>	

Summary  
academic  
report  
(Summary  
report  
card)

**Young Women's Leadership Charter School  
Evaluation Report**

Cydney Beal (Advisory 401) School Year 03-04

Cumulative Results To Date: Proficient or better / High Performance Standing:  
 91% 42% Honors

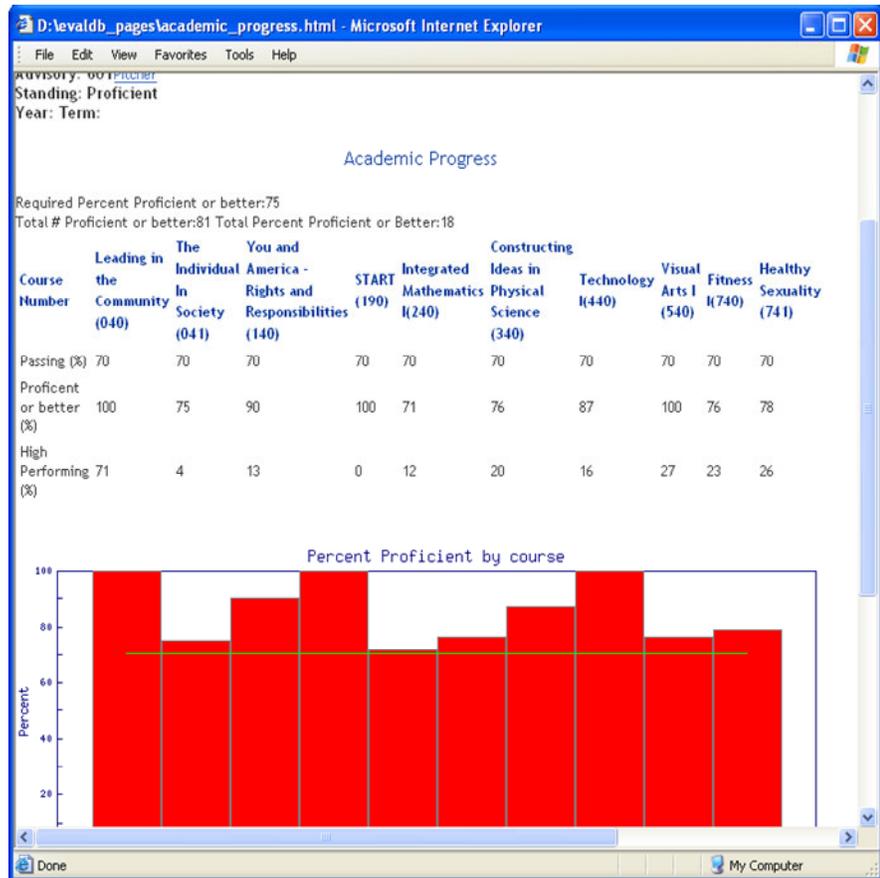
Promotion Presentation  
 01-02 Proficient

Dept/Course/Faculty	Acad. Yr	% Prof. or Better	% High Perform
Humanities 170 McCain	03-04 Civil Wars	66%	10%
Humanities 193 Farrington	03-04 START Reading Seminar	92%	58%
Mathematics 275 Woodard	03-04 Accelerated Integrated Math IV	91%	50%
Science 365 Buenrostro	03-04 Hon Phy	80%	50%
Technology 470 Ariza	03-04 CompGraArt	100%	82%
<b>Cumulative Results Current Academic Year:</b>		80%	39%

11/12/2004

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11/12/2004

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