The graduation rate in America’s 50 largest urban public school systems continues to be only around 50%. For African-American males in Chicago, the graduation rate is just 39%. Over the past 35-40 years there has been little to no improvement in the graduation rate and almost no convergence in the achievement gap. Schooling is one of our most powerful levers for improving lives; it is increasingly important for labor market success and it is strongly protective against violence involvement.

Why are we making so little progress on this major social problem? While there is no shortage of new and innovative ideas for improving school outcomes for disadvantaged children, what is lacking is good evidence about which promising ideas actually work in practice. These new and innovative ideas are almost never implemented in ways that can be rigorously evaluated.

The University of Chicago Urban Education Lab (UEL), a new part of the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute (UEI), is devoted to partnering with local, state and federal government agencies to carry out randomized education-policy experiments and other rigorous research studies aimed at improving education policy and outcomes for youth in urban schools.

The UEL, led by Roseanna Ander, Jonathan Guryan, Timothy Knowles, Jens Ludwig, and Stephen Raudenbush, is a virtual network of 43 leading education policy experts in their respective fields from top research universities across the nation, assembled with the goal of answering education policy questions using gold-standard evidence derived from randomized controlled trials of the sort common in medicine. Another hallmark of UEL projects will be the use of consistent benefit-cost analysis methods across studies of different candidate intervention approaches, in order to help policymakers allocate scarce resources to the most socially valuable uses. A final overarching goal of the UEL will be widespread dissemination of these results to policymakers and practitioners, beyond standard academic outlets, so that every school and every child in the country can benefit from state-of-the-art best practices.

The UEL research team and affiliates already have a variety of projects underway that aim to improve our understanding, through rigorous experimental methods, of how best to address urban education policy and educational outcomes. Additionally the UEL will provide pro bono technical assistance for the structuring of new and existing policies and programs so that they can be rigorously evaluated. More information about the Urban Education Lab can be found at our website: https://uel.uchicago.edu or by contacting Roseanna Ander at rander@uchicago.edu.