

1.2 million students do not graduate on time from high school each year. That is 30% of all teens<sup>1</sup>. Dropping out is now referred to as a “silent epidemic” by K-12 education leaders, so it’s easy to see why school districts nationwide are employing new strategies to combat high dropout rates. Students on the verge of dropping out often need a flexible way to make up for classes they failed the first time around. Programs including online or hybrid courses are rapidly gaining acceptance as a credit recovery method, with innovative delivery options that enable students to work at their own pace and engage them in a new kind of learning.

Littleton Public Schools (LPS) is helping lead the way. A mid-sized, award-winning district, LPS students consistently rank above state and national averages on standardized tests and the district boasts the highest graduation rate in the Denver metro area. But even a high-performing district like Littleton was seeing its lower achieving students fall behind. “We were losing too many students between freshman and senior year,” says Melinda Ness, Littleton’s Coordinator for the Gifted & Talented. “The process was gradual – first they lost interest and started missing classes, and then got too far behind to catch up.”

Requiring students to retake the same courses in an accelerated summer program or with younger students the following year was proving ineffective. That’s why, through a unique partnership with Arapahoe Community College (ACC) and with the help of Blackboard software, Littleton developed a way to get at-risk students back on track for graduation.

### Getting Students Back on Track

With the assistance of a collaborative funding effort amongst the general, special, gifted and alternative education departments, Littleton began their program by seeking a fresh



### Quick Facts

- + Blackboard client since 2006
- + Student enrollment: 15,869
- + 25 schools
- + 53 courses on Blackboard Learn implementation

<sup>1</sup>Alliance for Excellent Education. (Oct. 2007). *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*

approach to credit recovery and assigned Melinda Ness and Karen Goodwin, Director of Alternative Education, to the task. As the Gifted & Talented Coordinator, Ness realized that both failing and gifted students needed alternatives to the traditional classroom to stay engaged in school. Students who are more advanced need to work at a faster pace or a deeper level, and students who have fallen behind need extra help to get back on track. “After a student fails a class,” says Ness, “we cannot expect to do the same thing a second time and succeed.”

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Melinda Ness  
*Gifted & Talented Coordinator  
Littleton Public Schools*

Teacher Joe Dinnetz describes COLS as, “standards-based education that can be tailored to individual student’s needs.” Dinnetz also says Blackboard K-12 solutions help him provide a familiar and reliable academic structure for his students. “Content and courses change, but the interface is the same,” he says. He can see when students log in, whether they have clicked on an assignment, and how much time they take on different tasks. He uses the information to help students work more effectively, providing individualized feedback through grading and comments.

The first step was implementing a Web-based learning program built with Blackboard technology as a means of offering a wide selection of classes either online or through the Center for Online Studies (COLS), a hybrid online and face-to-face classroom, located on the Arapahoe Community College campus. Ness says that the location, far from the distractions and drama of high school, paid immediate dividends. “These students are less interested in the social aspects of high school,” she says. “They’re not all behind – some are simply tired of waiting for everyone else. They just want to come in and get it done.”

“Kids can always access the Blackboard system,” says Ness. “Teachers find it easy to use, it’s so intuitive, and parents love the gradebook. They can see online how their child is progressing.” But parents see more than just a grade. They can also view their child’s work, teacher’s feedback, and what’s next in the course – all through the Blackboard system.

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### Individualized Learning and Collaborative Teaching

Students attend COLS, five days a week, during a scheduled half-day, full-day, or evening period. An offering that began with a single teacher and full-day class for 20 students has expanded to include half-day and evening times, a social studies and language arts instructor, a math and science specialist, and a special education teacher. Each day program instructor manages one class in each of three sessions while they share grading and planning duties. There is also one class at night.

Each student works online independently, using the Blackboard system, with support from a credentialed teacher in the classroom. Even those students who join COLS in mid-semester get up to speed quickly with a teacher-developed orientation course.

Instead of returning to a high school where they experienced failure, students work online at their own pace, in a small classroom, mentored by a credentialed teacher. On a typical day, students arrive together, sit down in front of their computers, put their headphones on and begin learning where they left off the day before. If they miss a day or need to repeat a

difficult concept, they do not fall behind their peers. One student may be starting Western Civilization, just as another is finishing it.

Dinnetz describes his role as that of a facilitator. With a small class and four hours of dedicated time, Dinnetz gets to know students and understands when they need help and motivation. He might sit in front of the room grading student work or walk the room. Students raise their hands for assistance. "It's a delicate balance, between not disrupting the students when they're in the groove and making sure they're making progress and getting the deeper meanings," he says.

### Students Find Success

The results speak for themselves. Each year, more and more Littleton students stay in school by participating in COLS. More specifically, 2008 saw 53 percent of seniors in COLS graduate, while the number jumped to 83 percent in 2009. Miles Harford, a fifth-year senior in the COLS program, is just one success story. "In my junior year in high school, I had no hopes of graduating," he says. "Now I have a week left until graduation. If it weren't for COLS, I wouldn't be graduating."

Ness believes the location of COLS on the ACC campus is one of the program's top draws. Students who were once at risk of dropping out discover that college may be a good place for them. "ACC goes out of their way to make the kids feel comfortable," she says. "Our students carry college IDs and have access to the libraries and participate in job fairs. They love it." Another fifth year senior, Kevin Doss, agrees. "I didn't want to go back to a regular high school," he says. "My experience at the Center for Online Studies was a really good one. Being in a small environment was really great for me. I learned so much more this year."

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ACC staff help students with joint enrollment, registration, campus programs, and in some cases financial support for post-secondary applications. Many students have already earned college credit by graduation and remain on campus to pursue their degrees. Dinnetz sees the transformation in his students when they start to experience success instead of failure in school. According to Dinnetz, they start to realize "I'm just different from everyone else."

### Next Steps: Enrichment and Professional Development

Ness would like to expand use of the technology platform to provide enrichment to gifted middle school students. "If they're ready for high school math, but not mature enough to attend class on campus, they could take classes with high school instructors online," she says. She also thinks that free from time or place constraints, another opportunity lies in the area of professional development for teachers.

The hybrid model may also help Littleton recruit younger teachers who enjoy the flexibility of teaching in a hybrid classroom and are comfortable with technology. Dinnetz cannot imagine teaching any other way, "I get to teach all of it - freshmen English, AP U.S. History, geography, math and science. And I get to personalize instruction to the students and mix it up."

The success of COLS students has spread throughout the district and each year the district adds more capacity and courses to the program. The additions of music theory and AP history classes in 2009-2010 signifies a transition to more specialized, advanced courses. For her part, COLS student Caitlin Golden sees the results. "Blackboard technology has improved my academic performance," she says. "I've been getting As and Bs instead of Cs and Ds."

# Blackboard K-12

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