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Credit Recovery: Exploring Answers to a National Priority



Credit Recovery: Exploring Answers to a National Priority

It has been called the “silent epidemic” affecting our nation’s high schools.¹

High dropout rates dim individual students’ prospects and put our nation’s communities and future at risk. The costs are staggering, both in terms of financial disadvantage and social impacts. High school dropouts earn on average \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates. They are more likely to be unable to support themselves and three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed. Even more daunting is the likelihood that they’ll slip into poverty from one year to the next.² In many cases, students in elementary and middle school have high ambitions and they plan to graduate high school and go on to college. Yet, as students move through their secondary school experiences, the process of gradual disengagement begins. Sometimes students report that they are bored or disinterested, and in other cases, family issues and priorities take precedence.

The consequences of disengagement are startling. During a recent town hall meeting on the nation’s dropout crisis, Bob Wise, former West Virginia Governor, stated that “...30 percent of teens, or 1.2 million, don’t graduate from high school on time. That number jumps up to nearly 50% for minority teens.”³ Wise noted that high school dropouts from the class of 2008 will cost the United States an estimated \$319 billion over their lifetime. That estimate includes income the students will have lost because of lack of education and costs associated with publicly funded healthcare, prison stays and other services.

A closer look at the results of a recent study on this subject reveals that over 60 percent of the students who eventually dropped out of high school failed at least 25 percent of their credits in the ninth grade, while only 8 percent of their peers who eventually graduated had similar difficulty.⁴ As the results reveal, credit recovery may be an effective strategy to improve graduation rates. As guidance counselors, principals and administrators emphatically point out, for many students (including those who leave because of boredom) dropping out of school is a slow process of increasing disengagement.

The March 26, 2009 edition of Education Week contained a special insert, Technology Counts, focused on the evolution of e-education opportunities and achievement. The overview to the issue observes that “one of the biggest growth areas in online education has been in credit recovery, which is for students who have failed or not completed a core course needed for graduation.”⁶ As educational leaders, practitioners, policy-makers, politicians and parents will attest, improving our nation’s high school graduation rates is a critical objective. Any strategy that supports improved graduation rates merits closer attention. According to Dr. Anthony G. Picciano, Professor and Executive Officer, Ph.D. Program in Urban Education for the Graduate Center — City University of New York and a researcher with The Sloan Consortium, “Anything we can do to ease this crisis needs to be considered, including online credit recovery programs. We know that online learning is expanding throughout American secondary education and it is only natural that it should play a role in addressing the drop-out crisis.”⁷

“Strong credit recovery programs help to knock out excuses for students not to succeed.”

Ms. Rose Valderaz
Director, Virtual High School
Ector County, Texas

“Back in my junior year of high school, I had no hopes of graduating until I talked to my counselor about the Center for Online Studies in Littleton School District. Now I have a week left to graduation. If it weren’t for COLS, I would not be graduating.”

High School Student Interview⁵
Littleton, Colorado

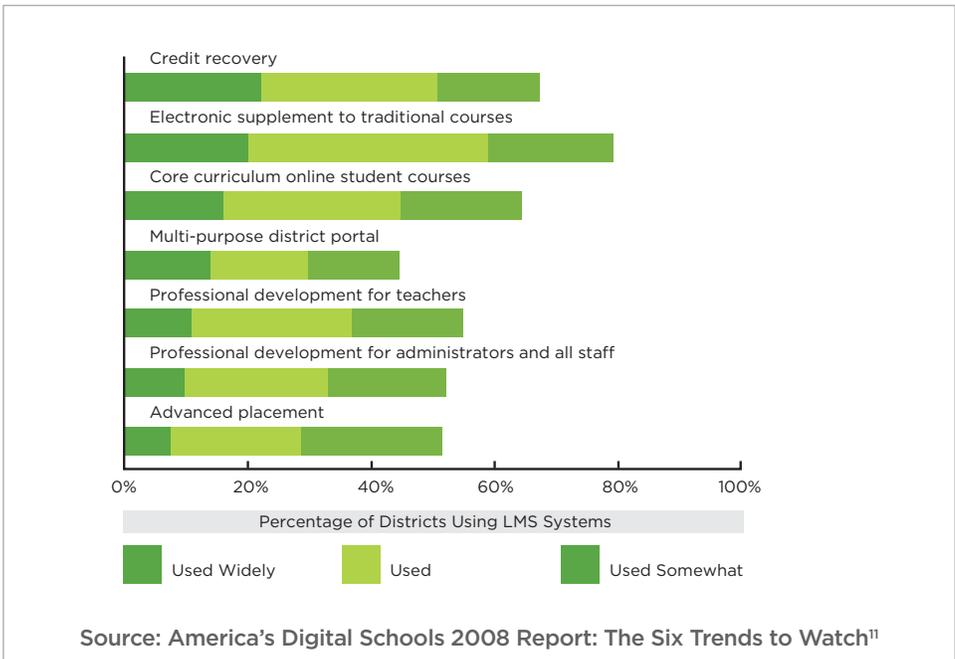
A Closer Look at 21st Century Credit Recovery

As the education industry and its partners in the community at large expand their exploration of credit recovery strategies and opportunities, it is critical to establish a shared working definition. The International Association for Online Learning (iNACOL) defines credit recovery as passing and receiving credit for a course in which a student was previously unsuccessful in earning academic credit toward graduation.⁹ It is important to note that in the iNACOL definition, “credit” is distinguished from “first time credit” in that students have already satisfied seat time requirements for the course in which they were initially unsuccessful and instead can focus on earning credit based on competency as defined by content standards. iNACOL also points out that the goals of credit recovery programs typically focus on helping students stay in school and graduate on time.

Another definition of credit recovery is offered in the Arizona Department of Education AIMS Intervention and Dropout Prevention Program Toolkit. This description states, “Most credit recovery programs identify the population they serve as students who are toward the second half of their high school career, who are older, and whose main focus is the completion of the credit requirements to graduate from high school. By being in the second half of their high school careers, it means that the students have already earned approximately 1/2 of the credits needed for graduation.” This description also notes that credit recovery programs are “...distinct from alternative programs designed for students who need to be in a setting other than standard education for the majority of their school career.”⁹

Interestingly, the use of online learning platforms for credit recovery appears to be increasing. The 2008 report from America’s Digital Schools indicates that more than 60 percent of the 4,000 technology directors surveyed nationwide report usage of a digital Learning Management Systems (LMS) for credit recovery applications.¹⁰

Online learning can be used to address and capitalize on a student’s individual learning style and make it possible to differentiate learning more effectively, based on continuous assessment and adjustments to individual student needs.



Credit Recovery Models: Evolving Opportunities for Students and Their Schools

Credit recovery programs have become far more innovative than the traditional “summer school” of years past. In the 21st century learning environment, credit recovery models are remarkably varied and flexible. The summer school option continues, and now, many schools and districts also offer students credit recovery opportunities before and after school during the regular school year, along with weekend classes, and programs that are available during the school day. In all of these models, online instruction is delivering important benefits to students and schools alike, because of its efficiencies, flexibility, and cost effectiveness.

The “where” of credit recovery courses is also evolving. School campuses, alternative sites (such as community colleges, public libraries, and other municipal facilities), and online programs are all serving as venues for successful high school credit recovery program delivery.

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Online instruction is rapidly becoming an essential part of the credit recovery landscape. Some schools and districts opt for a model that delivers credit recovery courses totally online. Others choose a hybrid model that combines online instruction and student work with a face-to-face teaching environment. The source for online credit recovery courses ranges from the purchase of “off the shelf” online course content to courses developed by the district or school.

Dr. Anthony Picciano, researcher with The Sloan Consortium, believes that online learning will continue to grow. “My sense is that online credit recovery will increase over the next several years. We saw a definite blip upwards in the number of school districts using online credit recovery between our first study in 2007 and our follow-up study in 2009. I think that the nature of online credit recovery will expand to make greater use of blended learning techniques, rather than using the fully online model. The reason for this is that students who struggle in courses tend to need more individual attention and the blended environment may be more conducive to individualization than the fully online or fully face-to-face models.”¹²

Still other institutions are tapping the resources of state-based virtual school providers and course developers. Educators interviewed for this report indicated that often, the most effective model for credit recovery is frequently a blended/hybrid model, because students often benefit from and need the additional support of real-time face-to-face interaction with a teacher but need the personalization and flexibility that online learning affords.

Credit Recovery in Ector County, Texas

“We, as a team, knock out any excuse for any of our students to not be successful.”

With a district enrollment of 26,000 students, Ector County is working to increase graduation rates using credit recovery courses delivered both in online and in offline formats. The district did extensive research before embarking on their current credit recovery approaches, including site visits to other districts in Texas. Rather than selecting one model for credit recovery, the district chose to offer multiple models in order to address as many students' needs as possible.

Ms. Rose Valderaz, the district's Director of the Virtual High School, notes, “We pride ourselves in the use of Blackboard as an international platform that prepares our students for college/university online learning. We are importing courses into the Blackboard platform from class.com and using courses purchased from American Preparatory Institute.” When asked about the student services Ector County provides, Ms. Valderaz states, “We open our lab from 7a.m.-9 p.m. and during that time we offer the support of certified teachers, tutors, and counselors. We're offering homework assistance and tutoring assistance, along with mentoring support for students who need those services. We team with all of our secondary schools, including the alternative schools, our night staff and online teachers to make the best possible plan to meet our students' individual needs.”

Ector County offers two kinds of credit recovery. They provide credit by exam, a paper-based program, offered at each of the district's secondary campuses, every 6 weeks from 4-6 p.m. daily, for five weeks. They also offer credit recovery online, which offers complete courses in six-weeks, with standard online student-teacher interaction. The online option does not offer a “test-out” approach. The district also provides credit recovery opportunities during normal school hours in addition to the before/afterschool programs. They also offer a district-wide 12-month program which includes summer school credit recovery and online advancement.

Ms. Valderaz noted that district teachers working as teacher of record for the online courses do customize the course. She pointed out that this adds a personal touch to the curriculum. The teachers add a syllabus, pacing chart, banners, and announcements to create a classroom atmosphere fully supported with face-to-face assistance if needed. She said, “While the program is still new, I know that it has helped. This is the only thing we are offering in our district as an alternative education offering. I definitely feel that we will make a difference in graduation rates.” She also noted that the district is piloting a program in which one group of junior high students is taking Geometry B and simultaneously taking Geometry A online, after failing Geometry A first semester, in order to pick up missing skills. The goal is to determine if students can learn enough of the skills and concepts they missed to complete the entire course with the goal of earning full credit.

A Closer Look at the Data

“In 2004, a synthesis of new research on K-12 online learning reported results across five major meta-analyses. The authors reported that on average, students perform equally well or better academically in formal online learning situations as students under traditional instruction.”¹³

In the 2006-07 school year, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) students who self-reported taking courses for credit recovery had a passing rate of 90.2 percent, similar to the 91.2 percent passing rate for the entire FLVS student population.¹⁴

Online Learning: Growing Proof of Efficacy

An article entitled *Research shows Evolving Picture of E-Education* published in the 2009 *Technology Counts* issue of *Education Week* states, “Online classes may be a relatively young instructional practice for K-12 schools, but experts already generally agree on one point: Research shows that virtual schooling can be as good as, or better than, classes taught in person in brick-and-mortar schools.” Author Debra Viadero notes that, “...some new research also finds that online courses are beginning to score more successes with the lowest achievers—possibly because many are high school students who see the online courses as a last chance to earn enough credits to graduate.”¹⁵

Online learning can provide an environment in which instruction can be delivered in new or different formats for students who were previously unsuccessfully in a course.

Revisiting Pedagogy for Credit Recovery

Curriculum experts frequently point out that the integration of online learning strategies often opens new opportunities for success for students enrolled in credit recovery programs. Online learning can provide an environment in which instruction can be delivered in new or different formats for students who were previously unsuccessful in a course. Online course delivery provides much needed flexibility and dimension, including:

- Capacity to deliver multimodal, individualized, and self-paced learning experiences
- Technology to engage students in interactive content, using animation, simulations, video, and audio, and to provide immediate feedback as students complete tasks and assessments
- Flexible pacing to support the learning momentum of each individual student
- Authentically personalized instruction that can focus on the needs of individual students, so that students do not need to repeat what they already know and can accomplish.

Because students can often learn at their own pace, review and repeat instruction as needed, and can take advantage of the flexibility offered by a digital learning environment, they are often better able to grasp the essential content and concepts required for satisfactory course completion.

The Kentucky Virtual High School Experience

The Kentucky State Department of Education operates an innovative credit recovery program. Beth Gaunce, Program Consultant said, “Our program is in place because our state’s schools and districts were trying to find alternative ways to make up student credit. Some contracted with another vendor but realized that was not sufficient. Our program’s enrollment is open for summer, spring, and fall, so credits can be retrieved and students stay on track for graduation.”

In the Kentucky program, students take an abridged version of the whole course. Informal diagnostics are completed and then students are either placed in the full course or they are assigned to a separate abridged course managed by a teacher who also works with a number of other students individually. Kentucky has developed about 50 percent of its own courses and purchases the rest from a variety of providers. According to Jamie Keene, the program’s Branch Manager, only students scoring 50 percent and above are eligible for credit recovery. Students who score below 50 percent are not eligible for this credit recovery program. Program officials note that instruction is different in the credit recovery format and is approached as a strategy to prevent dropouts. Students experience frustration if they are required to go over the same content and need specialized instruction to meet their needs. This credit recovery program is offered as an alternative to schools and districts and is a strategy to assure that students will get what they need.

Program officials also noted that when districts or schools do not have the resources to pay teachers for credit recovery courses, Kentucky Virtual High School is a great resource. Tuition ranges from \$150 for credit recovery full credit to \$300 for a full credit, 2-semester course making it affordable for participating schools and districts.

While current economic pressures have made it more difficult for the state to develop more courses, the program’s staff already have their eyes on the future, with plans to modularize content and develop it in the style of learning modules/objects, with pre and post-tests for diagnostics. The goal is that the instructional content will be used for full courses and can be personalized for individual students. Students would then have the opportunity to “test out” of modules. Advises Beth Gaunce, “It’s important to modularize your program and build in strong flexibility so teachers can be proactive in solving student learning issues.”

The Dollars and Sense of Credit Recovery

For a growing number of districts, online and hybrid approaches to credit recovery are helping to accomplish core goals for graduation without dramatic budget increases or heightened demands on staff and facilities. From a budgeting perspective, online credit recovery often gives schools a strategy to retain students in the school and as a result, keep the funding associated with those students. The before/after school models enable students to attend school full-time and still make up the courses they failed previously. Additionally, when schools can identify at-risk students and bring them back into full-time attendance, schools can restore full funding for those students.

From a staffing and personnel standpoint, online credit recovery enables one teacher of record to serve many schools within a district or across a wider geographic area. When schools provide online credit recovery on-site, students can often be monitored and assisted by part-time instructional assistants. If the issue is one of facilities, before and after school programs can leverage existing classrooms, labs and library spaces, without significantly adding costs.

Credit recovery programs have the power and the demonstrated ability to measurably reduce dropout rates and improve students' chances of graduation.

Expanding the Vision

The successes of online and hybrid models for credit recovery open up several other potential directions for the future. For students in the middle grades, credit recovery strategies can help assure that students are better prepared for the rigors of high school academics. Another interesting application has begun to emerge. Educators are testing the idea of "concept recovery" as part of their remediation strategies, borrowing some of the techniques used in successful credit recovery programs. Here, students have the opportunity to re-learn and master essential concepts that are core building blocks for progressive academic work. It is an innovation convergence of both online learning and credit recovery strategies, applied in new ways.

As schools and districts evaluate strategies for improving graduation rates, online and blended model credit recovery programs have become critical "go to" options. These programs have the power and the demonstrated ability to measurably reduce dropout rates and improve students' chances of graduation. Credit recovery delivered with online support enables educators to tailor instruction based on a student's specific skill gaps, so students can pass courses in which they did not initially succeed. And credit recovery is also a way to help districts with larger transient populations give students the opportunity to catch up with coursework, so they do not lose credits as a result of school transfers.

Online Credit Recovery Offers Important Pedagogical Opportunities: Excerpts from a Conversation with Dr. Anthony G. Picciano, The Sloan Consortium

When asked about the specific advantages to online credit recovery approaches and changes in pedagogy that can make online credit recovery more effective for students and schools, Dr. Anthony Picciano of The Sloan Consortium made several important observations. He noted, “The most obvious benefit is that students who have not passed courses delivered in a traditional mode may find credit recovery courses with an alternative format (e.g., online learning or a blend of online and face-to-face instruction) better suited to their learning styles.” Beyond the technological “chic” of online programs, many online courses allow students to proceed at their own pace and in the comfort and security of their homes. Many online credit recovery programs are also individualized and/or modularized so that teachers can customize the online courses to the specific needs of students and not simply have them retake the entire course all over again as is typically done in the face-to-face instructional model.

Picciano also underscored the impact of changing pedagogical approaches and their value in online credit recovery stating, “Individualized instruction, modularization, multimedia infusion, and on-going assessment are some of the pedagogical techniques that typify many online credit recovery courses. In addition, there is a growing appeal to using blended learning techniques that attempt to apply the best of both formats to help students who are struggling with a particular course or content.”

Picciano pointed out that online credit recovery can also work to remove the stigma for students having to repeat courses and can alleviate some of the strain teachers’ experience when reteaching students who were unsuccessful the first time. Picciano specifically cited the value of scaffolding modular approaches to concept and skill mastery, stating that the online environment can be ideally suited for this kind of instructional approach. He also noted that online learning can be used to address and capitalize on a student’s individual learning style and make it possible to differentiate learning more effectively, based on continuous assessment and adjustments to individual student needs.

Credit Recovery Online: A Powerful Strategy to Increase Student Success

As every educator knows, doing more with less is critical in these challenging economic times. Online credit recovery expands and optimizes instructional capacity, leverages available resources, and provides significant opportunities to students who may be at risk for failing specific courses or dropping out of school entirely, all without adding significant burdens to staff and facilities costs. When students drop out of school, they are disengaged, disconnected, and too often discouraged about their in-school experiences. Online credit recovery is a way to stem the tide of students dropping out.

In fact, 80 percent of the students responding to *The Silent Epidemic* survey said their chances of staying in school would have increased if classes were more interesting and provided opportunities for real-world learning¹⁷. Online credit recovery and hybrid approaches can indeed address 21st century students' needs for engaging learning experiences in a real-world environment. This approach to credit recovery will not answer the entire problem of high dropout rates. It will, however, deliver new answers to more students and provide new and needed opportunities for students to stay in and finish their high school educations. To borrow the words of Ms. Rose Valderaz of Ector County, Texas, "Strong credit recovery programs help to knock out excuses for students not to succeed."

"My experience at the Center for Online Studies was a really good one and the online portion of it, being in a small environment, was really great for me because I was a 5th year senior. I fell very far behind and I had to do an extra year. I did that extra year here (at COLS) to graduate. That was great as I didn't want to go back to a regular high school. I learned so much more in this year."

High School Student Interview⁶
Littleton, Colorado

Endnotes

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