Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery:
Getting Back on Track to Graduation

*i*NACOL
International Association for K-12 Online Learning

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PROMISING PRACTICES IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING

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Getting Back on Track to Graduation

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About Promising Practices in Blended and Online Learning

In 2008, iNACOL produced a series of papers documenting promising practices identified throughout the field of K–12 online learning. Since then, we have witnessed a tremendous acceleration of transformative policy and practice driving personalized learning in the K–12 education space. State, district, school, and classroom leaders recognize that the ultimate potential for blended and online learning lies in the opportunity to transform the education system and enable higher levels of learning through competency-based approaches.

iNACOL's core work adds significant value to the field by providing a powerful practitioner voice in policy advocacy, communications, and in the creation of resources and best practices to enable transformational change in K–12 education.

We worked with leaders throughout the field to update these resources for a new generation of pioneers working towards the creation of student-centered learning environments.

This refreshed series, *Promising Practices in Blended and Online Learning*, explores some of the approaches developed by practitioners and policymakers in response to key issues in K–12 education, including:

- Blended Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008-2015;

- Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery: Getting Back on Track to Graduation;

- Oversight and Management of Blended and Online Programs: Ensuring Quality and Accountability; and

- Funding and Legislation for Blended and Online Education.

Personalized learning environments provide the very best educational opportunities and personalized pathways for all students, with highly qualified teachers delivering world-class instruction using innovative digital resources and content. Through this series of white papers, we are pleased to share the promising practices in K–12 blended and online education transforming teaching and learning today.

Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery: Getting Back on Track to Graduation

Introduction

Our country has been trying to address the graduation crisis in many ways. We are seeing the impact of the efforts to improve graduation rates over the past twenty years including agreement among states to implement a common cohort-based graduation rate, research-based efforts to improve the transition to 9th grade, increased academic and social supports, individualized instruction, effective use of educational technology and building new capacity of districts to provide multiple pathways to graduation including re-engagement centers so young people that had previously disengaged from school can re-enroll in school to complete their diplomas.

Initially, when students were over-age and under-credited, school districts had to depend on alternative schools designed for students that need more support and/or flexibility, and used by students that may have disengaged from school, seeking a different learning environment or pushed out through disciplinary policies. With online and blended learning, districts are beginning to develop flexibly paced credit recovery to help students stay on track to graduation instead of finding themselves in senior year with no way to graduate. Alternative schools like other schools have been integrating online learning to create more options for students.

Today, one of the root issues is the older students who are missing a significant number of credits do not have the time to sit in class again, thus competency-based programs are a better option. Online learning is inherently modular. Allowing more time to build mastery and experience smaller successes along the way would also function to prevent huge gaps in their learning that ultimately requires them to retake full courses today.

At the heart of the issue, when students have gaps in learning, competency-based education approaches can let kids focus in more closely on where there are gaps in learning—rather than waiting until students have to catch up by re-enrolling in entire credits. Just focusing on making up credits may not help them strengthen their

Knowledge Taxonomies

BLOOM'S TAXONOMY – Original (1956)

Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation

REVISED BLOOM'S TAXONOMY – Anderson and Krathwohl (2000)

Remembering	Understanding	Applying	Analyzing	Evaluating	Creating

skills. Adaptive learning and educational software can really help students strengthen their basic foundational skills and increase fluency on the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy on appropriate learning goals. But, that is not enough. Students need to be able to engage in higher order thinking skills and demonstrate deeper learning to build their analytical, evaluation, synthesis and be able to apply their learning on the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. It is important for students to get to the higher levels of depth of knowledge, and an especially critical issue for kids who are having trouble in school. It is important that our system begin to transform around the needs of students. To ensure success, the focus should be on how we help students graduate with the skills to be successful in life.

Changing the Model and Redesigning Curriculum to Meet Under-Credited Students' Needs

Online and blended learning programs expand high-quality educational opportunities to meet the needs of students with a wide spectrum of academic needs and history. According to a survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics,[1] the primary reason online courses are offered in school districts is to expand offerings to courses that would otherwise be unavailable. The second most commonly cited reason for offering online learning is to provide opportunities for students to recover course credits from classes that were missed or failed. More than 75% of school districts use blended and online learning for expanded course offerings and credit recovery.[2] Online and blended programs offer a broad range of online courses and services to reach a variety of students, from struggling to gifted, who seek personalized learning pathways.

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Educators find that online and blended learning are effective ways to reach students who fail one or more courses, become disengaged, or who seek an alternative to traditional education. The origin of online credit recovery stems from early educational innovators offering online programs that initially focused on offering online advanced courses for high-achieving students. Programs such as Michigan Virtual School initially launched with Advanced Placement® (AP®) courses, then expanded offerings into core and credit recovery options. "Academic focused" programs are now finding success with a broad range of students. The growth of online learning programs focused on helping over-age, under-credited students to stay on track for graduation using credit recovery has redefined how educational technology can be used to address the needs of all students. The online and blended learning spectrum now includes advanced students in search of AP® or dual-credit courses, to over-age, under-credited students who are trying to find the right instructional mix to fill gaps in learning and to fit their unique learning needs to help them get on track to graduate on time.

Online learning is defined as education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the Internet.[3] The term does not include print-based correspondence education, broadcast television or radio, videocassettes, and stand-alone educational software programs that do not have a significant Internet-based instructional component.[4] The term online learning is used interchangeably with virtual learning, cyber learning, and e-learning.

The Clayton Christensen Institute defines **blended learning** as: a) a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; b) at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and c) the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.[5]

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[1]   Queen, B., and Lewis, L. (2011). *Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2009–10*. National Center for Education Statistics (Washington D.C.). Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012008.pdf.

[2]   Picciano, A. G, & Seaman, J. (2009) K-12 online learning. *The Sloan Consortium*. Retrieved from http://www.calvin.edu/~dsc8/documents/K-12-OnlineLearningFollowUp.pdf.

[3]   Watson, J., & Gemin, B. (2008). *Using online learning for at-risk students and credit recovery*. Vienna, VA: North American Council for Online Learning. Retrieved from http://www.inacol.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/NACOL_CreditRecovery_PromisingPractices.pdf.

[4]   U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development Policy and Program Studies Service, (2010).

[5]   Clayton Christensen Institute (2015). *Blended Learning Definitions*. Retrieved from http://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models/.

As online and blended programs increasingly focus on at-risk students and credit recovery, educators are finding that reaching these students presents a specific set of issues that are explored in this paper.

Defining "Credit Recovery"

Credit recovery refers to a student passing and receiving credit for a course that he or she previously attempted but did not succeed in earning academic credit towards graduation.[6] Credit recovery often differs from "first time credit" in that the students have already satisfied seat time requirements for the course in which they were unsuccessful, and can focus on earning credit based on demonstrating mastery on the content standards for the particular course. A credit recovery program provides "an opportunity for a student to retake a course in which he or she previously was not academically successful in earning credit towards graduation."[7] Notably, there is no federal definition of "credit recovery" available, although the federal government supports credit recovery programs through flexibility for use of funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).[8]

Defining "At-Risk" and "Dropout"

The term at-risk originated in the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*.[9] Although there is not a single accepted definition of at-risk, the U.S. Department of Education defines high-needs students as:

> "Students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools (as defined in the Race to the Top application), who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at-risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners."

While there isn't universal agreement about the nature of the "risk" itself, most educators would concur that the ultimate risk is that the student will exit from his or her K–12 education before successful completion.

Defining "Over-Age, Under-Credited" Youth

Over-age and under-credited (OU) students are defined as not having the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade. For example, an OU youth may be enrolled in 11th grade for the second time or be 17 years old and still registered as a high school sophomore. These students have struggled in traditional academic settings, and many ultimately choose to leave them. Even those high school dropouts who have left school for reasons unrelated to academic struggles become OU almost immediately upon departure, as they stop earning credits with their intended graduating cohort.[10]

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6   This definition was pulled from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, and used in the iNACOL *Online Learning Definitions Project* (October 2011) and is available at http://www.inacol.org/resource/the-online-learning-definitions-project/.

7   Georgia Credit Recovery Program. Retrieved from http://www.gacreditrecovery.org/.

8   See more at http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Credit-recovery-programs/Credit-recovery-programs-full-report.html - sthash.Es03jnia.dpuf.

9   U.S. Department of Education (1983). *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html.

10   Rock, K. and Rath, B. (2014). *Over-Age, Under-Credited Students and Public Charter Schools: An Exploration of Successes, Strategies, and Opportunities for Expansion*. Retrieved from http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/field_publication_attachment/NAPCS-OPP-OverAge-Report-05_0.pdf.

Characteristics of At-Risk Students

"Nearly one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Of those who do graduate, only half have the skills they need to succeed in college or work."

– The Silent Epidemic[12]

There are many elements that may predispose students to being "at-risk." Some factors are based only on academic achievement which include not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade level, falling behind other students of their age or grade level in educational attainment, failing two or more courses of study, not meeting graduation requirements, or not reading at grade level.

Other factors linked to being at-risk include non-academic indicators that can affect a student's likelihood of achieving success in school. Students who are pregnant, have parents incarcerated, or have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, among other factors, may be considered at-risk. *Broadening the Definition of At-Risk Students*, a commonly cited paper, considered students at-risk if they had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Low socio-economic status;

- From a single parent family;

- An older sibling dropped out of school;

- The student had changed schools two or more times;

- Had average grades of "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade; or

- Repeated a grade.[11]

Finally, some students are disengaged with learning. They no longer see the point of going to school. They have no authentic connections or primary relationships within their learning environment.[12] These students show signs of being at-risk through indicators such as: lateness to school, cutting or skipping class, school absence, and they no longer feel that school subjects are interesting or challenging.[13]

Multiple risk factors increase the likelihood that students will drop out. These factors fall into one or more categories: individual, family, school, and community. For most students, dropping out results from a combination of factors, often after a long process of disengagement that sometimes begins early in the child's educational years[14] or in the

[11]   Chen, X. &. Kaufman, P. (1997). *Risk and resilience: The effects of dropping out of school*, quoted in Broadening the definition of at-risk students, by Stephanie Bulger and Debraha Watson, The Community College Enterprise (2006). Retrieved from http://www.schoolcraft.edu/pdfs/cce/12.2.23-32.pdf.

[12]   Yazzie-Mintz, E. (2009). *Charting the Path from Engagement to Achievement: A Report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement*. Retrieved from http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/images/HSSSE_2010_Report.pdf.

[13]   Dalton, B., Glennie, E., and Ingels, S.J. (2009). *Late High School Dropouts: Characteristics, Experiences, and Changes Across Cohorts* (NCES 2009-307). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.

[14]   Hammond, C., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2007). *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report*. National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University and Communities In Schools, Inc. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497057.pdf.

transition to high school. The report *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success* states: "Academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out. Over 60% of students who eventually dropped out of high school failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade, while only 8% of their peers who eventually graduated had similar difficulty."[15]

Regardless of the exact definition, at-risk students are more likely than the student population as a whole to drop out of school, which is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as leaving school without a high school diploma or equivalent credential.

The Impact: "The Silent Epidemic"

The report *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*,[16] describes the challenges that face U.S. schools—and society as a whole—because of students becoming disengaged and dropping out of school.[17]

- Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, in poor health, living in poverty, on public assistance, or single parents with children who drop out of high school.

- Dropouts are more than twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty in a single year and three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed.

- Dropouts are more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as high school graduates.

- Dropouts are four times less likely to volunteer than college graduates, twice less likely to vote or participate in community projects, and represent only 3% of actively engaged citizens in the U.S. today.

While the dropout numbers have improved in the last 10 years, the national graduation rate has increased to an all-time high of 80% in 2013–14. Millions of students are still not completing high school and are suffering from these long-term effects. Particular groups of students struggle more:[18]

- State graduation rates for low-income students range from 58% to 85%.

- Most big cities with high concentrations of low-income students still have graduation rates in the 60% range and a few in the 50% range.

- The average graduation rate for Hispanic students is 76% and for African American students is 68%.

In 1987, the General Accounting Office reported "the social costs of the dropout problem include an under-skilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, and increased public assistance and crime. Addressing the problem through dropout prevention programs for at-risk youth still in school, and programs for return and continuation in school for youth who dropped out, may be less costly than allowing the problem to go unattended."[19] All those factors are still

[15] Legters, N., Kerr, & Kerri, K. (2001). *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success*. Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University. Retrieved from http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/school-dropouts/easing-the-transition-to-high-school-an-investigation-of-reform-practices-to-promote-ninth-grade-success.

[16] Bridgeland, J. M., Diluliu, J.J., & Burke Morison, K. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Retrieved from https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf.

[17] See more at http://www.silentepidemic.org/epidemic/statistics-facts.htm.

[18] *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (2014). Retrieved from http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/BGN_2014_Report.pdf.

[19] General Accounting Office (1987). *School Dropouts: Survey of Local Programs*. Retrieved from http://www.gao.gov/assets/150/145536.pdf.

true today, and students leaving their education prematurely remain an enormous problem for the public school system. One advantage, more than 20 years later, is the promise that online learning holds as a tool for engaging these students to catch up and get back on track to graduate.

Options for Credit Recovery Courses

The population of students needing credit recovery overlaps with the population of at-risk students, but the two groups are not exactly the same. Students need to recover credit because they have failed or dropped out of a class. A student who fails several classes is likely to be at-risk, but a student who fails only one class may not be. Conversely, a student may be identified as at-risk due to a variety of factors despite not having failed a single class.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 88% of school districts around the country offered some form of credit recovery courses to their students in school year 2009–10.[20] In addition, 55% of school districts reported using distance learning (most of which was online) during the 2009–10 school year; more than 60% of those classes were taken for credit recovery. As online and blended learning have grown significantly in the last five years, it is likely those numbers are significantly higher now.

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Connecticut became the first state in the country to mandate that all districts with dropout rates of 8% or higher must make an online credit recovery option available to all students.[21] In addition, beginning in 2013, Connecticut school districts must provide student support and remedial services, including online learning options, for students beginning in 7th grade, to complete any of their high school graduation requirements or end of the school year exams.

Like Connecticut, Iowa focused on credit recovery when Iowans discovered their third largest school district had more than a 10% drop out rate in 2010. They started a personalized program focused on high school graduation. "Graduation Destination" is an online standards-aligned program, which is successfully lowering the drop out rate and increasing high school completion in Iowa.[22]

Programs providing credit recovery or addressing the needs of at-risk students have been offered in in wide variety of contexts and methods. A report from the U.S. General Accounting Office summarized dropout prevention programs in a similar way: "While dropout prevention programs can vary widely, they tend to cluster around three main approaches: (1) supplemental services for at-risk students; (2) different forms of alternative education for students who do not do well in regular classrooms; and (3) school-wide restructuring efforts for all students."[23]

[20]   National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *Dropout Prevention Services and Programs in Public School Districts: 2010-11*. Retrieved from http://nces. ed.gov/pubs2011/2011037.pdf.

[21]   Connecticut Public Act No. 10-111. Retrieved from http://www.cga.ct.gov/2010/ACT/Pa/pdf/2010PA-00111-R00SB-00438-PA.pdf.

[22]   Hart, M. (2015). *Iowa District Offers At-Risk Students Online Option for Graduation*. THE Journal. Retrieved from http://thejournal.com/articles/2015/07/20/iowa-district-offers-at-risk-students-online-option-for-graduation.aspx?m=2.

[23]   United States General Accounting Office (2002). *School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies*. GAO-02-240. Retrieved from http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02240.pdf.

Credit recovery programs use a wide variety of instructional strategies, locations and schedules, which include:

- Traditional classrooms during school hours;
- At home;
- Self-paced learning and open enrollment;
- At learning centers; and
- In the evening and on weekends;
- Through student-teacher correspondence.
- In summer school;

Some schools offer full alternative programs, while others focus on returning the student to the traditional classroom. Some credit recovery programs grant credit only for courses, while others incorporate work experience and community service. Some target at-risk students enrolled in school, while others target dropouts who have left school. Some programs include home-bound students and those with special needs in addition to at-risk students, and some do not. Traditional curricular materials have been used, along with television, video, computer-based instruction, and, most recently, online and blended learning.

The Current Reality of Credit Recovery Programs

School administrators, policymakers, and politicians experience pressure to raise graduation rates. Too often, the pressure to "do something" conflicts with the need to actually arm students with the skills they need to achieve success in post-secondary education or work. Instead of challenging students to raise their performance to the level they must reach to be successful, too often credit recovery "solutions" have lowered the bar for passing.

Among the worst offenders in this regard are some products and programs that call themselves "online." These are often computer-based software programs that are low-cost, have very low levels (if any) of teacher involvement, and require very little of students in demonstrating proficiency. They are used primarily because they are inexpensive, and they allow schools to say students have "passed" whether they have learned anything or not.

These programs have very little in common with the online learning programs that are raising the bar of rigor and academic achievement for their students. Many teachers and administrators realize that online courses and programs can offer a different kind of learning environment, take advantage of true personalization, and challenge students to achieve at the levels at which they are capable. As one educator says: "Because of the e-learning aspect of our credit-recovery program, it also seems that students have changed their attitudes toward credit recovery. They realize that credit recovery is not all worksheets, repetition, and drudgery; it also means relearning the standards in engaging and interesting formats with lots of visuals and graphics to help students learn."[24]

What Can Be Done When Programs Are Competency-Based, Not Credit-Based

The introduction of competency-based learning offers another more targeted strategy to address the specific skills that students need rather than having students take entire courses over again. Students already do their "seat-time" and schools and programs can do a better job of identifying gaps sooner and supporting students to catch up and stay on track to graduate. Why does a student have to wait until he or she fails an entire course before an intervention to make up the learning is provided? Why take an entire course if you know exactly what skills you need to learn? It saves students time and doesn't force them to go through a course that they may have learned and saves schools money.

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[24]   Washburn, J., Categorical Coordinator, Castle Park Middle School (2004). *Credit Recovery Program Helps At-Risk Students Meet Promotional Requirements*. THE Journal. Retrieved from http://thejournal.com/articles/2004/08/01/creditrecovery-program-helps-atrisk-students-meet-promotional-requirements.aspx.

*Competency*Works and iNACOL have published a series of papers defining competency-based education and identifying best practices and key policies from around the United States.[25] The papers define competency education as learning in which:

1. Students advance upon demonstrated mastery;

2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students;

3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students;

4. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs; and

5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Many of the earliest competency-based innovations began in alternative schools such as Diploma Plus and Boston Day and Evening Academy. Recently states and districts have realized that competency education has benefits for all students. Over 25% of states are advancing competency education and there are examples of districts in over 67% of states beginning to convert to competency education. The boldest effort is in New Hampshire where they have replaced time-based credits with competency-based credits. Competency-based policies are enabling innovations in supporting students that need additional support. At the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School in New Hampshire, all courses are competency-based, and modular in units, allowing students to retake just the units or competencies they need in order to advance. This is described as "unit recovery" instead of waiting for a student to fail after an entire semester or year in school. Across New Hampshire, schools that have adopted competency-based approaches have seen reductions in discipline issues and significant drops in course failures and dropouts.[26] The approach is finding broader success and being adopted in programs around the country.

Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, New Hampshire
Charter school and state virtual school that offers online classes to students statewide

The Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) in New Hampshire is a charter school and also serves as the state virtual school, offering supplemental online classes to students statewide. That includes 62 "competency recovery" courses that allow students to take a whole course, or just the competencies they did not pass.

Each course is made up of a certain number of competencies or fundamentals, and the student needs to demonstrate mastery in these competencies in order to pass the course. If, for example, a student mastered and passed eight of the 10 key concepts or competencies for a course, he or she can re-learn and demonstrate mastery on just those two key competencies, rather than repeating the complete course. The competency recovery program allows the student to work until he or she has a complete understanding of the whole course. According to VLACS, "The focus in a competency-based school, such as VLACS, is on understanding and learning rather than forcing all students to learn at the same rate."

In addition, pacing is determined by each student in collaboration with parents and the teacher, giving students control over how and when they learn. VLACS also emphasizes the relationship between students and teachers, building in a low student:teacher ratio so instructors have the time to connect with each student.

[25]   iNACOL. Competency-based learning resources. Retrieved from http://www.inacol.org/resources/resource-search/?search=&resource_topics=14&resource_types=20&years=&authors=0&organizations=0.

[26]   Haynes, M. (2013). *Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire's Competency-Based System*. Alliance for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/strengthening-high-school-teaching-and-learning-in-new-hampshires-competency-based-system/.

> *Holding all students to high levels of expectations and providing supports to achieve mastery are key to equity.*

Competency-based learning gives students the opportunity to complete lessons that demonstrate their mastery of content as well as the support they need if they are having difficulty with specific content. A true competency-based approach requires the students to advance upon demonstrated mastery—often through a "performance" of demonstrating the competencies and creating evidence of the deeper knowledge, skills and dispositions acquired. In online education, learning management systems collect samples of student work, or evidence of learning from completed performance tasks. Students in competency-based learning environments have clear and explicit learning objectives and assessment is a meaningful process—so when a student does not demonstrate mastery, there are immediate feedback loops and supports to differentiate instruction. Digital content and tools can be very helpful for unit recovery and credit recovery.

When students are struggling, teachers must identify the interventions that will best meet the student needs and differentiate instruction. The supports and assessment based on student evidence are key.

There is an important distinction between competency-based learning and self-paced online courses. Many credit recovery programs utilize flexible pacing, particularly when course content is delivered online. The courses are often self-paced, often accessed from a school computer lab with a teacher facilitating the students to ensure that they can get the support they need.

Online and blended learning offer a delivery mode and are not necessarily "competency-based" by nature. To realize their potential, the instructional model designs need to be student-centered and competency-based. Competency-based instructional and assessment models using online and blended learning need to require demonstration of competency through a performance with evidence of mastery showing what a student knows and can do. To this end, online and blended credit recovery programs.

Adaptive content and technologies have the potential to be used as part of the instructional and assessment models for the following purposes:

1. Leveling: help students and teachers understand and pinpoint student proficiency levels upon entry for benchmarking student needs using data on differentiated lexile levels;

2. Real-time Scaffolding (RtS) with In-Course Corrections: providing content engines with adaptive artificial intelligence allowing differentiation of student needs "in the moment." These online learning programs can both identify the pre-requisite skills needed as well as recommend content and scaffolds to build the knowledge and skills toward mastery. A student can then catch up and get back on track with teacher pacing, grade level, and college- and career-ready expectations;

3. Creating Limitless Pathways: adaptive technologies that provide students and teachers with multiple pathways to ensure that students have more choices to move ahead when ready and on the learning edge of their "zone of proximal development." Thus, a student can always be working on the next sequential unit or lesson as he or she demonstrates competency. This helps to keep students fully engaged on the learning pathway and progression appropriate to their level with flexibility to move ahead;

4. Recommendation Engines: online systems that use adaptive technologies so that the system recommends content objects based on student proficiency levels and interests.

It is important to emphasize that not all online and blended learning programs used for credit recovery are competency-based. Flexible pacing does not equal competency-based learning, but flexibility could be one element in helping students catch up to proficiency. Demonstrated mastery through exemplary student work is central to competency-based education. Online and blended learning programs can offer digital content, tools and adaptive

technologies that provide specific functions and resources that are valuable in supporting personalized and competency-based delivery models.

Holding all students to high levels of expectations and providing supports to achieve mastery are key to equity. Programs should be designed with strong supports and interventions when students are not proficient and provide supports until proficiency is reached.

Which Approach is Right for Your Program?

No single approach to credit recovery comprehensively addresses the needs of all at-risk students.

1. Think about the "Why?" behind your credit recovery program.

   The goals related to credit recovery and at-risk students vary with each online program, and often include one or more of the following:

   • Helping students make up credits to meet graduation requirements;

   • Meeting graduation deadlines;

   • Preparing students for state exams;

   • Getting dropout students back in school;

   • Providing educational options for all students; or

   • Meeting budgetary concerns while trying to serve all students.[27]

2. Examine the current research and resources that suit your context.

   Online credit recovery programs should have research-based and clearly articulated student supports. Offering online credit recovery courses alone does not guarantee effective supports and interventions; however, many online learning programs enable educators to use data and technology to better identify each individual's learning gaps and needs to address them with differentiated supports.

The U.S. Department of Education published a report in February 2014 with key resources to help schools integrate in-person instruction with online content delivery to strengthen credit recovery programs.[28] This report notes that by "adopting a blended learning model, credit recovery programs can enhance online content delivery by personal instruction customized to meet student needs and school goals." The report identifies program examples and checklists for credit recovery programs in four categories:

1. Organizational structures;

2. Instructional strategies;

3. Student support strategies; and

4. Postsecondary strategies.

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[27]   Wisconsin Virtual School. Retrieved from http://www.wisconsinvirtualschool.org/crcourses.cfm.

[28]   U.S. Department of Education (2014). *Blended Credit Recovery: Strategies for Integrating In-Person Instruction into an Online Credit Recovery Program*. Retrieved from http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/sites/default/files/resources/blended_credit_recovery.pdf.

Ensuring Quality

Does your program ensure appropriate student supports by:

✓ Providing students with needed structure, motivation, and inspiration

✓ Allowing personal and informed intervention through data analysis

✓ Provides academic interventions and supports to augment content and skill gaps revealed through online course materials

✓ Ensuring students are on-track to graduation by regular check-ins, offering graduation specialists, social supports, mentors, advocates and/or life coaches

✓ Having extended hours of student support and instruction

Does your program ensure appropriate academic rigor by:

✓ Encouraging deep learning through multiple instructional strategies and varied opportunities for students to apply concepts and practice

✓ Focusing on transparency, student agency and habits of learning

✓ Engaging students in peer-to-peer intellectual inquiry, discussion, and exploration of content

✓ Engaging students in reading, writing, and critical thinking across the curriculum

✓ Enabling student control of certain aspects of learning

✓ Accommodating explicit college-bound instruction, messaging, bridging, and skill-building

✓ Supporting student advancement to increasingly challenging material, thereby expanding the focus of credit recovery from graduation to postsecondary readiness

– Adapted from Blended Credit Recovery: Strategies for Integrating In-Person Instruction into an Online Credit Recovery Program.[29]

The report also offers a program evaluation tool, as well as tools to help select strategies for program implementation.

Guarding for Equity

Both promising practices and policies need to be analyzed in improving strategies for helping students to get back on track to graduation. Many schools have policies that if students miss a certain number of days, then students cannot earn the credit. Thus, students with chaotic lives, in foster care, having to meet court hearings, having to take care of family, trying to balance jobs, disengaged from school, or are suspended because of behavioral issues may miss either some classes or whole days of school without opportunity to catch up on those units. Thus, we force them to take the entire class in credit recovery.

These students are often having problems in school for a reason—many have experienced a lot of failure in their lives—so it is important that programs are holistic in helping them to rediscover themselves as learners, engaging in how to navigate towards success, making room for the emotional parts of learning to be addressed, developing grit, using methods to self-reflect and persevering when they are facing challenges and they need to learn. Ultimately, it is about building the habits of learning within the process of acquiring the content knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed.

Schools need to address underlying root issues and providing student supports. There are difficult issues that need addressing systemically such as the over-use of suspension and expulsion, which is disproportionately used for kids of color, and this means that they miss school or have to seek other alternative sources of education more frequently.

Credit recovery programs are designed to be helpful and offer additional pathways for student success but if they are not of high quality, if the courses are low-rigor or if they do not meet the actual academic needs of students, these programs could be providing a lesser quality of education. It's a gray area—when designed well, credit recovery is an alternative pathway to graduation, when designed poorly, it becomes a problem of unequal education. Ensuring students are successful at each stage of their academic lifecycle is important and the gaps should be addressed in real-time with supports. Providing high-quality pathways to learn, ensuring high levels of learning and depth of learning, and providing the student supports to achieve mastery of the knowledge, skills and dispositions are critical.

[29]   U.S. Department of Education (2014). *Blended Credit Recovery: Strategies for Integrating In-Person Instruction into an Online Credit Recovery Program*. Retrieved from http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/sites/default/files/resources/blended_credit_recovery.pdf.
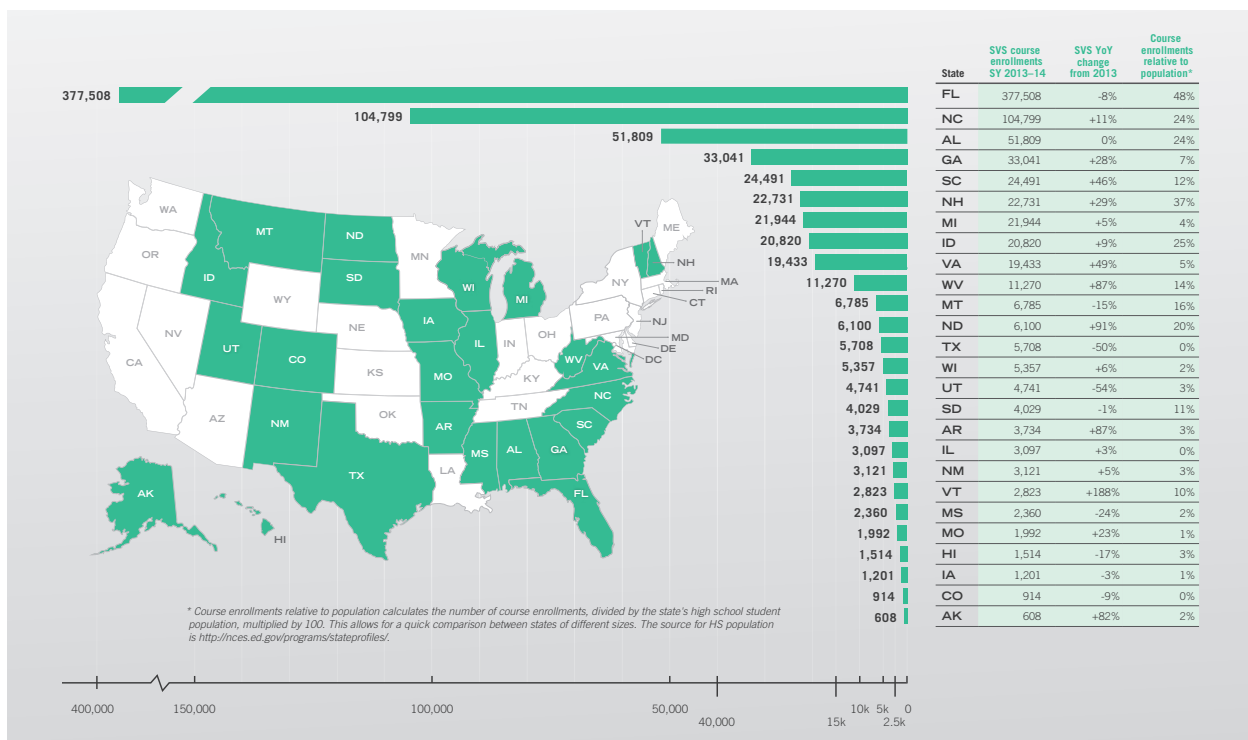
How States and Districts Offer Credit Recovery

There are a wide variety of programs offering online and blended learning credit recovery options to students in districts around the country. Some of these programs work within traditional high schools, others support students in high schools across an entire state, while others are full-time alternative schools focused on serving students at risk of dropping out.

State Virtual Schools

State virtual schools, created by legislation or by a state-level agency, provide a variety of supplemental online learning opportunities to students across the state. Most, if not all, of the 25 state virtual schools in operation around the country offer credit recovery classes to students to supplement their full-time course schedule at their traditional high school.

- Montana Digital Learning Academy provided almost 4,000 course enrollments in credit recovery courses in school year 2012–13, primarily serving students in larger districts in Montana.

- West Virginia Virtual School provided 2,059 course enrollments through its onTargetWV credit recovery program in school year 2012–13.

- Florida Virtual School allows all of its courses to be taken for credit recovery, and they also began offering intensive summer credit recovery courses in 2012 (see full program description below).

- Alabama ACCESS began offering 19 credit recovery classes in 2013–14. The courses permit students to prove mastery in units, allowing them to move past units in which they are proficient and concentrate on units in which they need additional work. All ACCESS courses are free to students enrolled in Alabama public schools in grades 8–12.

2014 STATES WITH STATE VIRTUAL SCHOOLS: COURSE ENROLLMENTS IN STATE VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

State	SVS course enrollments SY 2013–14	SVS YoY change from 2013	Course enrollments relative to population*
FL	377,508	-8%	48%
NC	104,799	+11%	24%
AL	51,809	0%	24%
GA	33,041	+28%	7%
SC	24,491	+46%	12%
NH	22,731	+29%	37%
MI	21,944	+5%	4%
ID	20,820	+9%	25%
VA	19,433	+49%	5%
WV	11,270	+87%	14%
MT	6,785	-15%	16%
ND	6,100	+91%	20%
TX	5,708	-50%	0%
WI	5,357	+6%	2%
UT	4,741	-54%	3%
SD	4,029	-1%	11%
AR	3,734	+87%	3%
IL	3,097	+3%	0%
NM	3,121	+5%	3%
VT	2,823	+188%	10%
MS	2,360	-24%	2%
MO	1,992	+23%	1%
HI	1,514	-17%	3%
IA	1,201	-3%	1%
CO	914	-9%	0%
AK	608	+82%	2%

* Course enrollments relative to population calculates the number of course enrollments, divided by the state's high school student population, multiplied by 100. This allows for a quick comparison between states of different sizes. The source for HS population is http://nces.ed.gov/programs/stateprofiles/.

Source: *Keeping Pace 2014*, Evergreen Education Group

Traditional District Programs

The growth of district online and blended learning programs is a significant trend across the United States with a majority of public school districts creating their own programs for online credit recovery. District credit recovery programs can be scheduled before or after school, during a scheduled class period, during summer school, or in full-time alternative programs.

- Omaha Public Schools (OPS) eLearning, which initially partnered with the National Repository of Online Content (NROC) Project to build credit recovery classes, has evolved into a blended learning program for all students, but still offers a wide variety of credit recovery courses to students.

- Washington D.C. students access credit recovery classes through PLATO Learning (Edmentum) and Apex at 14 high schools across the district. In order to allow students to stay on track for a four-year graduation, students can earn up to three credits during after-school credit recovery sessions. Students also have the option of taking summer school classes that are longer than typical semester classes in order to give these students more time to work through the material.

- Lufkin ISD in Texas serves about 150 students each year in its blended credit recovery courses through Edgenuity during school hours as well as after school. Teachers can modify the course content and monitor student progress through the online system, but also work with the students during the scheduled class time.

Charter Schools

Full-time credit recovery charter schools are opening around the country, which offer both full-time and individual courses for credit recovery.

- The Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) in New Hampshire is a charter school and also essentially the state virtual school, offering supplemental online classes to students statewide. The VLACS course catalog includes 62 "competency recovery" courses that allow students to take a whole course, or just demonstrate the competencies she or he did not pass.

- NET Charter High School in New Orleans offers credit recovery classes to students via Edgenuity in a computer lab. These courses are often taken by students who are struggling and unlikely to be reading at grade level. The teachers work "extensively with the students on note-taking skills, supplementing the credit-recovery classes with more personalized instruction, and prepping the students for the content they will encounter online."[30]

Post-Secondary Programs

Post-secondary programs offer supplemental courses for students to recover credit, either during the school year or summer.

- Kirkwood High School Distance Learning is a program of the Kirkwood Community College which serves school districts across Iowa to offer online transfer credit courses for credit recovery students ($150 per Iowa student per course). Kirkwood served 848 course enrollments in school year 2012–13, a 38% increase from 2011–12.

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[30]   Carr, S. (2014). *Credit Recovery Hits the Mainstream*. Education Next. Retrieved from http://educationnext.org/credit-recovery-hits-mainstream/.

Nonprofit Services and Programs

Innovative nonprofit programs support or become the school-level efforts to help students. These programs partner with high schools to identify and support these students, offering tutoring and other services.

- YouthBuild programs create authentic career connections to motivate and engage at-risk students. They offer low-income young people ages 16 to 24 the opportunity to work full time for six to 24 months toward their GEDs or high school diplomas while learning job skills by building affordable housing in their communities. Today, there are 273 YouthBuild programs in 46 states, Washington, D.C. and the Virgin Islands engaging approximately 10,000 young adults per year.

- Colorado Youth for a Change is a nonprofit working to support at-risk students in Denver Public Schools. One program offers credit recovery courses to students and another offers at-risk students a solid support network to help prevent the student from failing (see the full program description below).

Alternatives to Credit Recovery

In addition to the various programs serving credit recovery needs, some states are addressing the need for flexibility in how long it takes for students to complete classes. With more and more students taking online classes, it is possible for students to have extended time to complete a course. In Utah, the Statewide Online Education Program allows students to choose courses from among multiple providers and have their per-pupil funding follow them at the course level.[31] The program provides incentives to online providers to continue to support students who do not complete courses on time, but still within an allowable time period, by allowing for partial final payment.

Case Studies and Promising Programs

As more schools and programs use online and blended learning options for credit recovery and at-risk students, there is a growing body of effective online instructional strategies. The examples that follow demonstrate some of these successful practices.

Florida Virtual School
Credit recovery courses delivered by a state-led supplemental program

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is the largest online program in the United States, and one of the most established. In the early days of the program, most students were seeking Advanced Placement® courses, accelerated learning opportunities, or scheduling flexibility. FLVS served more than 410,000 course enrollments in school year 2012–13; any of the courses in its catalog may be taken as credit recovery. FLVS students who are recovering credit are not segregated into special class sections and are mixed readily with their peers.

In addition, FLVS launched a summer credit recovery program in 2012. Courses are designed to be started together in cohorts and completed in a set amount of time (unlike typical FLVS self-paced, open-entry courses). The intensive, fast-moving courses are teacher directed and include discussions and assessments. Robin Winder, the Director of Student Learning, noted that, "If students need more content and longer time, we will counsel them back to a more self-paced FLVS course." There were 6,399 course enrollments in these courses in school year 2012–13.

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[31]   Utah's Statewide Online Education Program. Retrieved from http://www.schools.utah.gov/edonline/.

Both types of online courses lend themselves to personalization, which instructors believe is key to success for these students. "Some people still raise the question, 'If the students are not motivated enough to pass the course in the classroom, how can we expect them to be self-motivated in an online course?' We find very little difference in the level of motivation between students seeking credit recovery and other FLVS students," according to Tania Clow, Community Relations Specialist. "They all come to FLVS for specific reasons with a drive to succeed. Our personalized learning approach helps students stay focused on their goal." If motivational or behavioral issues do arise, FLVS provides counseling, student supports, or they work with the student's local school counselor to continue supporting the student individually.

Success rates for students recovering credit have been remarkably similar to rates for the entire FLVS student population. In the 2012–13 school year, FLVS students who took designated credit recovery courses had a passing rate of 80.1%.

A significant number of online programs outside Florida use FLVS curriculum, and the use of FLVS online curriculum for credit recovery has risen dramatically in recent years. This growth, in part, drove the development of diagnostic testing as part of the FLVS courses for appropriate leveling. For example, pre-tests in math courses identify both the material the student has mastered and the material that is still problematic so the students can fill gaps and accelerate progression to stay on track.

Putnam County Schools Virtual Instruction to Accentuate Learning (VITAL Program), Tennessee
Credit recovery courses offered by a school district in a blended environment

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"We've experienced success by placing all of our blended learning initiatives under one program—VITAL. We're giving students district-wide class options they wouldn't normally be able to take, or that they would take but want the opportunity to move at their own pace. All of these classes, from high school dual enrollment down to elementary school Spanish—will allow students to get what they want in their education, and are all under one umbrella."

– Sam Brooks, Personal Learning Coordinator, Putnam County Schools

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The Putnam County Schools Virtual Instruction to Accentuate Learning (VITAL) program began in 2008 as a small online credit recovery program that served only 100 students district-wide in its first year. The original program was ineffective in helping students recover credits and master content. As a result of the failure, district leaders redesigned the district's instructional strategy and created VITAL.

VITAL focuses on ensuring that students who are behind can catch up within a class or recover credits if they have failed a class. Unlike some programs that do not engage with students until they have failed a class, VITAL works with classroom teachers to promote formative assessment by intervening when students are falling behind. The teacher assigns online modules for students to work on during nine-week blocks to replace failing grades within a current course. Students may work on the modules at home, during lunch, and after school. Students may also take part in credit intervention during fall and spring breaks to catch up in classes in which they have fallen behind by working at their own pace using online modules. A third credit intervention program, called Smart Lunch, is for students who did not pass a course, but earned a grade of 65% or higher and passed the end-of-course exam (if one exists) for that course. In this program, teachers staff an hour-long lunch period in which students work on digital modules to make up the difference in points to receive a passing grade in the course.

At the high school level, VITAL combines an online "originating teacher," who is certified and highly qualified in the subject area, with an onsite facilitating teacher who is an active participant in the student learning experience. This

"team teaching" instructional strategy has proven extremely successful in ensuring the students receive timely feedback to keep them on track. The facilitators answer to the head of VITAL and handle all components of blended learning at their school. With blended learning expanding across the district, the elementary and middle schools also have an onsite blended learning coordinator.

VITAL has acquired online courses and licenses from Florida Virtual School, Odysseyware, Edgenuity, and CompassLearning. VITAL uses the Blackboard learning management system and Genius student information system to manage students and content in blended courses and the NWEA MAP for assessing student progress. Using content that the district can edit allows VITAL to customize courses based on demonstrated student needs.

Additional VITAL program elements include the following characteristics.

- VITAL Collegiate High School provides dual credit with three local colleges and one university. In each semester of the 2014–15 school year, at least 300 students were taking one or more dual-enrollment classes, totaling more than 1,000 course enrollments.

- All 9th grade students in the district take a nine-week online personal finance course through VITAL.

- Homebound students work with online courses and receive instruction from an online teacher, which allows them to keep pace with students in the school. This approach allows students to work with a highly qualified teacher in each subject area, instead of only with the homebound teacher.

District leaders believe that VITAL is improving student achievement in multiple areas. In particular, the program has produced impressive student gains in credit intervention and credit recovery in Cookeville High School. When the district first introduced credit intervention in 2012, it reduced failure rates by one third in its first semester, and the rates have remained at this level ever since. In Smart Lunch, 45 out of 52 assigned students received credits in courses they would have failed during the 2013–14 school year. Between credits saved through interventions before students fail a class and credit recovery after students fail a class, VITAL has saved or recovered more than 300 course credits. This has played a key role in increasing Cookeville High School's graduation rate from 86% to 94%, and the district's graduation rate from 86% to 93%, between 2008 and 2014.

Wichita Public Schools, Kansas[32]
Learning centers for district students who have failed a course and under-credited, over-age students

Wichita Public Schools (WPS) launched a dropout recovery and credit recovery program called Learning Centers in 1999. WPS initially used server-based software to allow students to access courses on computers, but shifted to Apex Learning during school year 2007–08. Students access online courses from their schools or from three learning centers around the city, receiving help from certified teachers and support specialists regardless of where they access courses. During the 2013–14 school year, Wichita's credit recovery centers helped 890 students complete 1,023 courses.

The online courses allow students to move quickly through content they have mastered and spend more time on content they are struggling to understand. The courses are self-paced, and students can enroll at any time.

All eight of the district's traditional high schools have credit recovery centers located inside the school buildings where students can go during and/or after school to retake the courses they have failed. One or two teachers who teach at

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[32]   Wichita program description taken from the Clayton Christensen Institute's Case Study written by Katherine Mackey. Retrieved from http://www.christens-eninstitute.org/publications/wichita-public-schools-learning-centers-creating-a-new-educational-model-to-serve-dropouts-and-at-risk-students/.

the high school where the credit recovery center is located take turns staffing the center after school in exchange for hourly pay.

The credit recovery centers are open varied hours to accommodate different student schedules. Student attendance is not required during set days or hours. This flexibility allows students to work around their after-school activities and enables the centers to serve a greater number of students.

To motivate students to finish their online courses, the district charges current high school students a fee of $90 per half-credit course (dropouts pay a yearly registration fee of $5), but offers at least 250 scholarships every year to students who cannot afford to pay the course fee. The Learning Centers do not require student attendance during set hours each day. Although students can set their own schedules, the program requires them to complete at least a half credit each month and attend the centers for at least 15 hours per week to remain enrolled. Outside of these requirements, students are free to divide their study time between the Learning Centers, where they have access to a teacher, and home. This flexibility allows students to work around their employment and family schedules—and it also enables the Learning Centers to serve a greater number of students.

Each Learning Center employs: a) licensed teachers, b) a counselor, and c) a student support staffer, who coordinates and arranges for various services such as mentoring, child care, transportation, meal vouchers, and housing.

By 2010, the district was operating three dropout recovery centers and eight credit recovery centers. The program served 946 students in 3,904 half-credit courses and had a waiting list of more than 300 students during the 2008–09 school year. The district's graduation rate continues to rise, partially as a result of the district's focus on supporting its students who are behind in credits.

The three dropout-recovery centers have collectively helped over 1,200 students earn their high school diplomas since 1999.

Colorado Youth for a Change
Unique nonprofit that offers credit recovery courses as well as early intervention programs to students at risk of dropping out

> *"Failing ninth-grade Algebra is the reason many students are left back in ninth grade, which in turn is the greatest risk factor for dropping out."*

In *Locating the Dropout Crisis*, Balfanz and Letgers identify: "Failing ninth-grade Algebra is the reason many students are left back in ninth grade, which in turn is the greatest risk factor for dropping out."[33] This is the driving force behind the programs at Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC), a Colorado nonprofit that works with nine school districts in the Denver area. CYC coordinates all dropout recovery and credit recovery efforts for Denver Public Schools, focusing on 9th and 10th graders. CYC offers a variety of program options for different students.

An online credit recovery program at one high school allows up to 25 students to work individually in a computer lab to complete their coursework. One or two teachers and CYC volunteers support students in their coursework and track the number and types of credits students need to pass. Students complete classes that range from 4–8 units long. Each unit consists of two tests, one computer-scored and one written test scored by a teacher. Students must pass each test with scores of 80% or higher in order to complete the unit and move on to the next unit. Once both tests are passed for each unit, the student has completed the course and earns five credits.

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[33]   Balfanz, R., & Letgers, N. (2004). *Locating the Dropout Crisis*. Retrieved from http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report70.pdf.

CYC works with students to navigate the Apex system, learn how to best answer test questions (both essay and multiple choice), help students track progress, and remind students of weekly goals. During the fall 2013 semester, CYC served 47 students, and 76% of the students completed at least one credit recovery course.

CYC relies on school-based intervention specialists as well as teachers to identify 9th grade students who are at risk of failing classes, and therefore failing high school. With the additional support, the burden on teachers is lightened, and students are more likely to successfully pass the full-year course and continue on to 10th grade.

The "Essential Learning Recovery" is for 9th grade students who may not be able to access seats for full course recovery, but failed the first semester of a class and are in danger of failing the whole year of the class. CYC facilitates a conversation between the student and the teacher to figure out what the student must do to demonstrate mastery and pass the class by the end of the year. The teacher identifies attendance, participation, and performance goals, and then the student, the student's guardian, and the teacher all sign a contract agreeing to the goals.

CYC staff support the student for the rest of the year so he or she can reach that goal. The student may have to make up assignments or exams missed in the first semester and attend biweekly tutoring sessions, and the CYC staff members and other volunteers support the student as much as possible. With CYC support, the teacher is not re-teaching first semester material while trying to move the rest of the class forward.

John Marshall High School of Chicago Public Schools, Illinois[34]
Options for students in an inner city high school within Chicago Public Schools

The John Marshall High School of the Chicago Public School (CPS) district—the country's third largest district—provides an extensive alternative education and credit recovery program for CPS students.

The program, called Pathway to Accelerated Student Success (PASS), has three components. The most innovative is the PASS Institute, an alternative education program primarily for students who have dropped out of Marshall or other Chicago Public Schools and have re-enrolled into the Institute. In addition, the Institute serves students who are more than a year behind schedule in meeting graduation requirements. A significant number of students are teen parents; the flexibility and timing of the PASS Institute helps them meet their family responsibilities.

The Institute actively recruits students from across the CPS region. A "student advocate" is employed by the Institute to engage with students who have dropped out, to work with counselors in other schools to find students who are candidates for the program, to market the program with brochures sent out with report cards and other materials going to students, to attend alternative education "fairs," and to meet one-on-one with potential students.

Students enroll on a rolling basis. They attend the Institute during the regular school day but with a choice of starting and ending times to accommodate parenting or work schedules. The students work with online courses, on-site teachers and mentors, and counselors provided by the Institute.

The program has a total of 60 seats with students revolving through and graduating in January, June, or August. During most of the year all 60 seats are full. Institute leaders have found that the most successful approach is to have students take just one course at a time, even if they have more than one credit to make up (as most do). This approach allows students and counselors to focus on one course, complete it, and then move on to other courses.

In addition to the Institute, PASS offers credit recovery courses to students who are enrolled in John Marshall High School during the school day and after school.

Funding for PASS is provided by a grant from the United States Department of Education (DOE).

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[34]   Evergreen Education Group (2015). Unpublished report on Credit Recovery Program Proof points.

Lessons Learned

The use of online and blended learning in providing an alternative delivery method of instruction for at-risk students is increasing as demonstrated by the number of school districts implementing successful credit recovery programs with at-risk students and dropouts.

Key lessons demonstrated by these credit recovery programs include:

1. Many online programs serving credit recovery and at-risk students—but not all—have a significant face-to-face component for student supports. The blended approach provides expanded counseling, tutoring, and support services including face-to-face contact with teachers, who provide not only subject-area support, but also guidance on effective study skills.

2. Online courses can motivate students who have failed in the traditional classroom settings, as they can now learn at their own pace, with the one-on-one help of an instructor. Students' individual learning preferences and interests can be integrated and curriculum can be adapted to meet the students' needs in online courses, which may make them more engaging to some students than traditional face-to-face classes. In addition, programs that use online courses can address mobility issues of students who move regularly from one school in the district to another.

3. Online and blended learning are particularly well suited for students recovering credit because they allow for personalized instruction, both by the teacher and through the use of adaptive software and course management technology. Diagnostic testing allows students to proceed once mastery is demonstrated. Personalized content selections and activities can offer multiple support options for those who need specific help and to keep students engaged.

Conclusion

Educators and leaders need to focus on what works best for students based on learning sciences research and youth development theory as the starting point in planning and designing effective blended and online learning programs for at-risk youth. The question is not whether to use technology, but how to best utilize advanced learning technologies to dramatically improve outcomes for students.

Online learning holds the promise of creating new, innovative personalized learning approaches, and online programs are already showing the way.

As Susan Patrick, President and CEO of the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL), stated,

"When students have completed the attendance required in a course, and were unsuccessful, the options for earning credit towards graduation are often limited to using the same book, often with the same teacher, within the same seat-time approach. Is this really the best way to invest resources of time and money in helping students succeed? One alternative is a well-designed credit recovery program based on research on youth

development and best practices. Online learning can provide tools, content and resources to better meet a student's unique needs, but the student support and rapid interventions are key. If a student has learned 40% of the material for a course, online credit recovery allows accelerated learning and flexibility. If a student is struggling with a lesson, the teacher can focus instruction where the student needs the greatest support. This individualization and personalization allows students to feel a one-to-one connection with their teachers and engages them with the material more thoughtfully.

Online options also expose students to new models of learning that open their minds to the options online and blended can offer in high school and beyond. When students have struggled, and online learning opens up new pathways to success, they can find alternative ways to learn and to graduate, while also developing new skills for success in life."

Credit Recovery Resources

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