

Practical Leadership

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

CREDIT RECOVERY

Why is credit recovery so important – and why now? Despite a very minor increase in the high school graduation rate in the US, it remains at a dismal 75% average – ranking the nation 21st in overall graduation rates among developed nations (NCES, 2012). In Pennsylvania, the average graduation rate is 82%, but the range across districts (not counting charters, which generally report lower rates), is from a low of 41% to nearly 98%. As in most states, minority groups and poor children graduate at a much lower rate than white and more advantaged students (NCES, 2101). The cost of this situation in a large state like Pennsylvania is enormous – not only in lower wages earned by high school dropouts, but also the increased demands on public services (such as welfare, Medicaid, and the justice system. (As an example, nationwide, nearly half of all prison inmates – federal, state and local – are dropouts.)

Why Do Kids Drop Out?

Credit recovery programs have become a central feature of dropout prevention and recovery because of the reasons students give for dropping out of school in the first place. “Failing Courses,” “Not Enough Credits” and “Overage for Grade” (or some variation on these) make the “top 10 reasons kids drop out of school” in almost any study done in the past 15 years. In short, they drop out because they have fallen behind, and despite the reason for doing so, don’t see much hope of catching up in order to graduate. If a student is 16 and has only 1 or 2 credits (of the 16-24 needed in most states), it looks like an insurmountable problem – especially if they only option is to earn credits on the regular school schedule.

In some cases, district policies create dropouts. Many Florida districts have attendance policies that prescribe failing a student who misses more than a certain number of days each semester. As a result, for migrant workers’ kids, it becomes impossible to earn a high school credit. If they leave to follow the harvest in April, before school ends, and come back in October, two months after school has started, they start out missing the required number of days needed to earn a credit. Other policies can have equally terrible effects.



Increasingly, the solution in many districts is an accelerated credit recovery programs, many of which are offered outside of normal school hours.

What Is Credit Recovery?

One of the best summaries of credit recovery programs comes from the Center for Public Education – a non-profit agency devoted to improving school performance in our most challenging environments. Their “at a glance” publication is one of the best available for school personnel, and provides an excellent starting point for planning credit recovery programs. At the end of this **Research Into Practice** brief, readers will find a study guide that can be used to launch a discussion of credit recovery in their own schools.

The Center for Public Education writes that Credit Recovery Programs are “Summer school offered after school.” Credit recovery programs aim to help schools graduate more students by giving students who have fallen behind the chance to “recover” credits through a multitude of different strategies, often online. This worthy effort nevertheless raises many questions for those involved in education simply because so little is known. We can all easily imagine summer school, that un-air-conditioned institution of American education – but what exactly is “credit recovery?”

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A Partial Definition

The most common definition of credit recovery is simply “a structured means for students to earn missed credit in order to graduate.” There is no federal definition of credit recovery...and there is no coherent definition emerging among states that cite credit recovery programs in statutes or administrative code. Different programs allow students to work on their credit recovery classes over the summer, on school breaks, after school, on weekends, at home on their own, at night in school computer labs, or even during the school day. Some programs have mandatory prerequisites, such as a minimum attendance record for the original class, a specific class year, or minimum number of total missing credits, and some do not. Within all the variation, there are three main kinds of credit recovery programs:



Fully online. In these classes, students recover lost credits through online curricula, which can be provided through software from a number of sources: the district or school itself, state-run virtual schools, charter schools, non-profit consultants or for-profit consultants. Typically, there are no face-to-face meetings or opportunities for real-time instruction; work is done at home or in school labs with little to no supervision. Course lengths vary greatly.

Blended. Blended-learning credit recovery programs mix face-to-face and online learning. These courses are usually self-contained and pre-programmed. Instructors, who may be either certified teachers or uncertified proctors, oversee and aid as needed. Other blended online courses also offer real-time interaction with teachers. However, since there are no established practices, the degree to which the online component is integrated varies.

In person. In-person credit recovery programs most closely resemble old summer school classes. The setting is traditional and usually there are no online components. Classes take place after school or at night a

few times a week during a semester, over the summer in concentrated and abbreviated sessions, or on weekends' (Center for Public Education, 2012).

More Questions Than Answers

Based on a comprehensive survey of literature, state policies, and existing programs, the Center for Public Education (CPE) concludes, “credit recovery is a subject where there are far more questions than there are answers. The wide variation in program structure could be a good thing, encouraging creative solutions to the dropout problem. However, since so little is known, we cannot identify what works and what doesn't. Because the concept of credit recovery is so varied and its implementation so malleable, there is little sense of its impact and effectiveness, leaving many in education with questions.” CPE then goes on to list some of the most common ones:

“Is credit recovery effective?” Because credit recovery is largely a local effort, there is little data available on the rigor or effectiveness of the programs. Proponents contend credit recovery allows struggling students to direct their own learning and work at their own pace, a claim which might entice the large proportion of dropouts who cite boring classes or falling too far behind as reasons for dropping out. Skeptics wonder if credit recovery are helping students learn, or greasing the pipeline to graduation.

How long should a class take? One of the biggest debates in credit recovery centers around how credits are earned. The oversight of how credits are earned varies widely, as some states spell out exactly how credit should be earned and recorded, and others let individual districts or principals decide. The result is wide variation. For instance, some states have credit recovery courses that last nine weeks; others allow 18 weeks or more; others set no minimum time period.

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How should credits be recorded? Credits can show up on student transcripts as a complete replacement, additional grade, average, or other alternative. The differences raise questions of fairness, because the same work could garner more or less credit for students in different districts.

Is there equal access? Rural students' lack of Internet access could affect their access to credit recovery, as well, since many credit recovery programs are offered solely online.

Is it all about the money? Are some schools shepherding students toward credit recovery classes based on financial imperatives alone? Because of the current financial burden on states, many are concerned that part of the push toward credit recovery may be financial. While district savings vary enormously, computer-based credit recovery programs are known to be more cost-effective than hiring teachers to support students in small groups or one-on-one settings.

Who Benefits?

According to the Afterschool Alliance, students who are poorly motivated to earn a diploma, have serious, untreated behavioral or mental health issues, or lack enough self-discipline to meet the demands of self-paced learning (and do not have a mentor/coach available) are risky candidates for credit recovery programs. But according to the Alliance, a number of special populations do benefit substantially from these programs:

- o Youth with adult responsibilities such as caring for family or paid employment
- o Youth involved with the criminal justice system
- o Older immigrant youth/English language learners
- o Youth with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral issues
- o Youth aging out of the foster care system
- o Youth who move regularly from one school to another
- o Teen mothers



Moving Forward

An excellent article from the Education Commission of the States (June, 2011) outlines the policy and administrative decisions that need to be made in order to launch a successful credit recovery program. Especially important is creating a supportive state and district environment in which schools can operate credit recovery programs

Each of the following components is likely to improve student access to and program quality of credit recovery and proficiency-based credit offerings.

- ⇒ **Requiring the offering of credit recovery courses:** In an era where credit recovery can easily be offered online or via computer modules, credit recovery should be an option for students statewide, not only in districts that elect to offer it. **Idaho** requires districts to implement a credit system by grade 7 that includes credit recovery. Any student not meeting the minimum requirements of the credit system must be given an opportunity to recover credits or complete an alternate mechanism to become eligible for promotion to the next grade. **Colorado** requires each middle and high school's school performance report to identify whether credit recovery programs are available.

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- ⇒ **Getting the word out:** Students can't go if they don't know.
- ⇒ **Availability:** To the extent possible, credit recovery programs should be made available through the state's virtual high school or other means accessible to all students statewide (open credit-bearing courseware). The enabling legislation for the South Carolina Virtual School Program states that one of the purposes of the program is to offer students access to credit recovery programs.
- ⇒ **Finance:** The short-term costs of credit recovery will vary significantly, based on whether schools offer computer-based modules (lowest-cost), online courses (mid-range cost), or small group or one-on-one teacher-led instruction (greatest cost). **Colorado** has established a student re-engagement grant program to provide funds for local education providers to provide educational services and supports to students to maintain student engagement and support student re-engagement in high school. Grant applications must include a description of the local education provider's policies and practices related to course completion and credit recovery.
- ⇒ **State standards:** Programs should be aligned with state standards and allow students to target just those standards the student did not meet the first time, not all standards in the course.
- ⇒ **Pacing:** Programs should be self-paced and competency-based (rather than based on a rigid progression of concepts or completion of a certain number of seat hours).
- ⇒ **Quality of instruction:** More research is needed to determine which elements ensure that credit recovery programs are of high quality. As with any blended learning models, quality and accountability are important, and states should consider elements that reflect this. **Florida** legislation, for example, urges districts to use learning gains and other appropriate data and provide incentives to reward high-performing teachers in credit recovery and intensive intervention courses. States might additionally consider using incentives aimed at the development of open-source instructional modules. The [Digital Learning Council's 10 Elements of Digital Learning](#) also provide guidance to states.
- ⇒ **Clear program completion expectations:** State policies should clarify how a student can demonstrate that s/he has mastered the concepts that caused the student to fail the course the first time. States with end-of-course exams often specify that the student must pass the related end-of-course exam to earn course credit. **Louisiana** requires students to either (1) complete the course requirements for a computer-based credit recovery program approved by the department of education (DOE) or (2) pass a DOE-approved final exam, which may be a DOE-developed end-of-course exam or locally developed final exam.
- ⇒ **Evaluation:** States should consider reviewing credit recovery programs on a regular basis to determine the percentage of students who eventually earn the missed credit through credit recovery, and retooling program offerings as needs are identified.
- ⇒ **Taking it to the next level:** States and districts should ensure there is a support system if a student is still struggling (one-on-one assistance if a student is not improving).



Help Is Just Around the Corner

Because of the lack of standardization, credit recovery programs exist in almost every imaginable size, shape and format. There may be one in a nearby school or district, or the state department of education may have information on state-wide resources and programs. By doing a little homework and looking at existing needs, it's possible to put together a program that is customized to an individual school, community, or even a group of students.

Start Talking

Use the attached "Discussion Guide" to begin the conversation about credit recovery programs in your own school.

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References

Afterschool Alliance (2009). *Providing a Successful Route to Credit Attainment and Recovery*. Issue Brief #39. Retrieved from: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_39_CreditAttainment.cfm

Education Commission of the States (June, 2011). Credit Recovery and Proficiency Based Credit. *The Progress of Education Reform*, 12:3. Retrieved from: http://inpathways.net/credit_recovery_2011.pdf

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2012). Public High School Graduation Rates. *The Condition of Education*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_scr.asp

Resources

At a Glance

<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Credit-recovery-programs>

An excellent introduction to credit recovery programs from the Center for Public Education.

Providing a Successful Route to Credit Attainment and Recovery

http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_39_CreditAttainment.cfm

From the Afterschool Alliance, this article has good advice and great examples of CR programs from across the nation.

Are Credit Recovery Programs Really Effective?

<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/guest-bloggers/are-ed-credit-recovery-program.html>

The key issue for many educators is whether CR programs work. The answer? It depends. Check this out to find out what does in fact work.

Georgia Credit Recovery Program

<http://www.gacreditrecovery.org/>

One of the most comprehensive programs in the US, this is a great model for other states and districts.

A Full Report

<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Credit-recovery-programs/Credit-recovery-programs-full-report.html>

A full version of the "At a Glance" report above, this gives more detail and research on the topic.

Reaching Graduation with Credit Recovery

<http://www.districtadministration.com/article/reaching-graduation-credit-recovery>

Lacking Credits, Some Kids Learn a Shortcut

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/11/education/11graduation.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

Great article from the NY Times telling the story of credit recovery in New York.

Finishing High School: Alternative Pathways and Dropout Recovery

By John H. Tyler and Magnus Lofstrom

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/foc/summary/v019/19.1.tyler.html>

Excellent research from an outstanding source.

Credit Recovery, CA Afterschool Network

http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/credit_recovery_booklet.pdf

This is a very deep resource from the California Afterschool Network, a leader in after school programming.

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Credit Recovery: Exploring Answers to a National Priority

<http://www.blackboard.com/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=6709ad83-3a41-4a1f-bd6f-9842bc04cec3>

This is a very complete and helpful "handbook" for educators about how to establish a CR program in local schools.

Providing Innovative Opportunities and Options for Credit Recovery Through Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs

<http://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds/article/providing-innovative-opportunities-and-options-credit-recovery-through>

Practical ideas, tips, and shortcuts for setting up an effective, innovative CR program.

Credit Recovery Programs Combine Online and Classroom Learning.

<http://thejournal.com/articles/2012/03/08/online-credit-recovery.aspx>

From T.H.E. Journal, this article shows how to combine online and face-to-face learning for maximum effectiveness.

Sorting Through Vendors

<http://aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=10702&terms=credit+recovery>

If you are shopping for a CR program, start with this helpful article from AASA about the questions you need to ask.

Credit Recovery and Proficiency Based Credit

http://inpathways.net/credit_recovery_2011.pdf

From the Education Commission of the States, this is a helpful resource for policy-makers and district officials.

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CREDIT RECOVERY DISCUSSION GUIDE

LET'S TALK ABOUT CREDIT RECOVERY

While we don't know everything about CR programs, we do know it is seen by many as a promising intervention that isn't going away anytime soon. Judicious educators will start the discussion now in order to determine what is most effective – and beneficial – for their students:

Who needs credit recovery programs?

How many students are in need of CR assistance? Who are they? What grade levels are most critical? What do we know about these students and their past performance? What special needs or challenges might they have?

How far behind are students in need of credit recovery programs?

Are they missing a course or two, or is it virtually an entire semester, year or grade? When do students needing credit recovery start falling behind?

Do we have an infrastructure in place that would support CR programs?

Do we have the technology available for online courses? Are we set up to handle "credit by proficiency" course completion and grading? What changes are required in our reporting and record-keeping system to accommodate CR programs?

Do we have the resources we need to launch a CR program?

Do we have the personnel, money and equipment we need? Does the state reimburse us at the same rate for CR courses? Are grants available to cover start-up costs? Can we partner with a local community college, neighboring district or intermediate education unit (service center) to make it work?

Will our school and community go for it?

Do we have enough staff committed to CR to make it work in our school? Are volunteers available for tutoring or online help? Will parents support this initiative if it involves out-of-school time commitments?

Which courses have the highest need?

What curriculum areas or specific courses should be the highest priority for CR program offerings?

When visiting or getting information about an existing CR program, be sure to ask the following:

- ◆ *What is the failure rate for credit recovery classes as compared to traditional classes?*
- ◆ *How do students who re-earn missed credit in credit recovery courses fare on statewide exams, as compared to students who passed the class the first time?*
- ◆ *How do students who earn diplomas after taking one or more credit recovery classes fare in postsecondary education or employment? How does this compare to nationally-available data on GED recipients, traditional graduates, and dropouts?*
- ◆ *Do they catch up after they've taken CR courses or continue to fall behind?*
- ◆ *What surprises occurred when you were creating your CR program? What are the pitfalls we should prepare for?*

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