

Assuring a Virtual Second Chance

In an effort to stem high school dropout rates, some districts are turning to blended credit recovery models that combine online learning with in-person support. But how do they work?

THE ALLIANCE FOR Excellent Education estimates 1.3 million American students fail to graduate from high school each year. That's why a growing number of districts are going virtual in their search for effective ways to help at-risk students make up academic credits. Enter online credit recovery, a 21st century technology-based approach that gives kids get a second chance—and a diploma.

Credit recovery isn't new (think summer school, weekend, or after-school classes), but the online versions of these programs are more flexible alternatives that can allow students to make their own schedules, work at their own pace, complete courses in shorter periods of time, benefit from a more customized educational experience, and learn independent study skills. And while online credit recovery is typically used for ninth- to 12th-grade students, many districts tend to target 11th- and 12th-graders most at risk for not graduating, including those who have dropped out and returned to school.

"We wouldn't be able to offer enough courses for every student who needs to recover a credit without an online program," says Keisha Kidan, virtual learning program coordinator of online courses for **Chicago Public Schools**, which now offers blended online credit recovery at more than half of its 122 high schools.



The Virtual Classroom

The surge of virtual credit recovery is a recent phenomenon. "We probably began seeing online credit recovery become a bigger focus about four years ago," says Matt Wicks, vice president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL). "Schools noticed how online learning could be utilized for students who were unsuccessful."

Whether in a computer lab, library, classroom, or home setting, students enrolled in credit recovery programs typically log in to their school's learning management system from a computer and move through the course, which often includes interactive multimedia learning objects such as video lessons and audio podcasts. Through pre-tests and assessments, the program software analyzes strengths and weaknesses in the student's understanding of the material and customizes lessons until mastery is achieved.

Many programs also include online instructors who give assignment feedback via e-mail, blogs, or discussion forums.

Although most online credit recovery programs can be used independently and without adult supervision, the most successful programs are those that follow the hybrid or blended classroom model that combines face-to-face learning with online curriculum, says Wicks. In-person teachers help hold students accountable while providing support, answering questions, and assisting with coursework when necessary.

"A blended environment would imply that there's a combination of classroom and online instruction," says Wicks. "If you don't have that educator involvement, then the programs are not likely to be successful and the educational experience not that great."

Models and Providers

Districts can purchase educational content or services from a third-party curriculum provider, contract with a state virtual school, or develop a program on their own by using open educational resources. There is no "one size fits all" approach.

Offered by a host of education curriculum providers, including Apex Learning, Plato, and Pearson, commercial credit recovery software is often seen as a viable choice for districts with an immediate need.

Depending on a district's requirements and budget, acquiring a program can be as simple as purchasing content or as complicated as setting up a turnkey solution that includes a learning management system, customized content, and teachers.

Four years ago, Chicago Public Schools turned to K12's Aventa credit recovery solution for the approximately 200 students each semester who need to make up an additional credit or more to graduate.

"With an online program we don't have limitations in terms of hosting a site, having to staff security or instructors, or worry about the logistics of setting up courses after school and on weekends," says Kidan.

K12's credit recovery course with online teacher support can run \$425 per student per semester. In Chicago, individual schools administer the program differently. Some let students use computers in classrooms or the library during their free time throughout the day to complete courses. Others set up computer labs before and after school for students and encourage them to log on and complete work at home as well.

Regardless of when and where students work on their assignments, the district requires that they be paired with adult mentors—not necessarily teachers—who shepherd students through their courses. Mentors act as liaisons between online instructors and students, and help coordinate other in-person resources, like tutoring with subject-specific teachers.

Another cost-effective solution for many districts is to build a customized credit recovery program using open education resources such as those available from the National Repository of Online Courses (NROC). Developed by the Monterey Institute for Technology and Education, this 6-year-old membership-based cooperative project boasts a multimedia education library that schools can personalize.

According to Gary Lopez, executive director at the Monterey Institute, more and more districts are piecing together quality online credit recovery programs with NROC's digital resources, especially in the face of tighter budgets. For the price of an annual membership (\$3,000), districts not only have full access to the project's content library but are also able to share best practices with a community of teachers and administrators who already have designed their own online programs.

"We're bringing yet another business approach that preserves the teaching staff at the district, gives them a whole new set of teaching tools to work with, and introduces them to other teachers," Lopez says.

As an independent study high school in the **Whittier Union High School District** (CA), Sierra Vista High School used as many open educational resources as possible, including NROC's digital library, to design its 3-year-old hybrid-model online credit recovery program.

And, although building the program is an ongoing effort, the time and trouble already has paid off in the form of big improvements in benchmark assessments.

"We have 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-graders getting A's and B's on these benchmark assessments," says Carrie Bisgard, Sierra Vista's online learning coordinator. "It's a huge boost to their self-esteem."

The Value of Virtual

Although there are complaints that some commercial credit recovery programs simply pass kids through courses, what distinguishes a quality program from one that just earns course credit ultimately comes down to how the content is delivered and the support provided, says Wicks.

"Some companies get a bad rap, but it may be the school district's fault rather than the company's fault," says Wicks. "If the company is selling content that is intended to be done with [on-site] teacher



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:

There's a difference between an effective credit recovery program that actually promotes learning and one that simply passes kids through a class. For more on what constitutes a quality online credit recovery program, go to thejournal.com/recovery.

support but that school district doesn't provide it, that would be like blaming the textbook because you had a bad teacher. On the other hand, sometimes those companies may not always emphasize the importance of the role of the teacher in the process."

One key to a successful credit recovery program is making sure teachers receive the professional development necessary to support the online environment, says Wicks.

Although the data touting the efficiency and effectiveness of online credit recovery programs is primarily anecdotal at this time, it is proving to be a welcome solution for school districts that are on a mission to see all students through to graduation.

"We need to figure out a way to get more kids to graduate from high school," says Bisgard. "Programs like this are going to be more important all of the time because we absolutely need to get more kids to graduate from high school." ^{the}

Lisa Plummer is a freelance writer based in Las Vegas.

LINKS

- **Apex Learning**
apexlearning.com
- **Carnegie Learning**
carnegielearning.com
- **Class.com**
class.com
- **Education 2020**
e2020inc.com
- **K12**
k12.com
- **Pearson**
pearsoned.com
- **Plato Learning**
plato.com