

Reaching Graduation with Credit Recovery

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Districts provide the latest programs to help failing students succeed.

By Alan Dessoif
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Florida Virtual High School teachers undergo quarterly, face-to-face training sessions to brush up on their teaching skills.

When students fail courses or drop out of school, it isn't good for them or their districts, which are under federal and state mandates to improve test scores and graduation rates. With those mandates and about 1.2 million students dropping out each year—or one every 26 seconds—“there is more pressure today than ever to help students stay in school and graduate on time,” according to Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

Nationwide, nearly one-third of high school students fail to graduate with a diploma, with an average of 7,000 dropping out every day. The problem is even more severe among African-American and Hispanic students, with nearly 50 percent not completing high school on time. Overall, in the nation's 50 largest cities, only 53 percent of high school students graduate on time, according to *Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap*, a report issued this year by America's Promise Alliance, a nonprofit founded in 1997 by Gen. Colin Powell and his wife, Alma Powell. Driven by government requirements to produce better results, more districts are using credit recovery programs to help students in trouble get back on track and boost achievement levels for the students and districts alike.

While some districts rely on traditional face-to-face interaction between teachers and students, many are adopting online solutions offered by commercial vendors, and others are implementing programs that blend face-to-face and online instruction. Some create their own programs from free online resources and their own curricula. In some states, education agencies and virtual schools provide complete programs.

However districts do it, the objective is the same: to give students who have failed courses because of poor grades or absenteeism, or who have dropped out of school, a chance to recover the credits they have lost so that they can move on to the next grade and ultimately to graduation.

Whatever credit recovery models districts use, education authorities agree that teachers play key roles. “Having an instructor on hand to help if the student is not understanding something is vital,” asserts Patrick. But “on hand” means different things in different models.

Face-to-Face

Although it has an online component, the credit recovery program in the Jackson (Mich.) Public Schools is based largely on personal classroom interaction between teachers and students. It's the best way to help students who have “burned a lot of bridges” through academic failure, absenteeism, and disciplinary issues in and out of school, says Superintendent Daniel Evans.

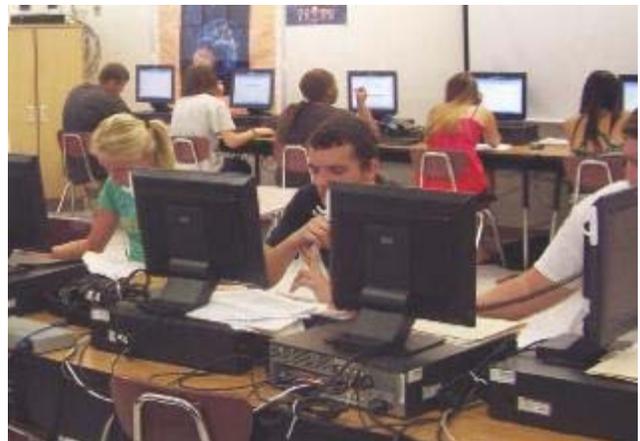
“We're working now with a girl who has been expelled from school three times, going back to seventh grade, and has been in and out of juvenile homes. The local court is asking us what we can do for her,” Evans says.

She and other students who need credit recovery participate in SAFE (Student Alternative for Expulsion), a program the district operates Monday through Thursday after regular school hours, from 3:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. in its Alternative High School. Two days are devoted to English and two to math. On both kinds of days, students spend half the time face-to-face with certified regular classroom teachers, who drill them on the basics of the courses they must pass, sometimes using textbooks and other printed materials, including novels for reading instruction. After a half-hour break for exercise in the school gym and bagged meals the district provides, the students go into the school's computer lab to continue their work on curricula from the Michigan Virtual School with regular classroom teachers in the lab answering any questions from the students.

"If they don't want to work, or are sleeping in class, or start posing an attitude with a teacher, they'll be dropped." -Bob Smoots, director, SAFE, Jackson (Mich.) Public Schools

"If they were doing all of this online, they would have to e-mail their questions to the teachers and wait for them to respond online," says Bob Smoots, a retired Jackson principal who directs the program. "Because the kids we work with are behind in their subject areas, especially reading and writing, they have a lot of trouble with that, including the spelling and typing to send a message. With their teachers right here, they can get their questions answered right away."

The teachers are regular classroom teachers, certified in their specialties, who are paid \$32 per hour for their additional credit recovery work, according to Evans. Smoots, who has 37 years of teaching and administrative experience, mostly in alternative education, says he is paid about the same. The credit recovery team also includes a special education teacher for students who have developmental or medical issues and a "behavior coordinator" who takes attendance and monitors the program's rigid requirements, including "zero tolerance" on behavior and required attendance for at least 80 percent of the semester-long program. If students leave before 8 p.m., it counts as an absence and "we call their parents to let them know," Smoots says.



Students attend a credit retrieval lab at Seabreeze High School in Volusia County (Fla.) Schools. It allows the school to offer all four subjects at the same time.

Most of the 20-30 students in the program every semester have serious problems, including previous expulsions. Some are on court-ordered probation for criminal offenses. To get into the program, they must meet with Evans and at least one member of the Jackson Board of Education. Smoots also interviews "every kid and a parent" and spells out the rules, making it clear that "if they don't want to work, or are sleeping in class, or start posing an attitude with a teacher, they'll be dropped."

About half the students are dropped, mostly because of attendance. "They'll come for a while and just quit," Smoots says. The other half complete the program and gain the credits they came for, largely because of the inspiration they get in the face-to-face interaction with the program's teachers, who are "dedicated" to their success, Smoots says.

Fully Online

A "huge growth" in online programs, with teachers involved but often at a distance, is the latest trend in credit

recovery, according to Patrick. Many of the online programs come from state virtual schools. At the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a district in itself, about a third of annual course enrollments are from students taking courses for credit recovery. Other Florida districts can enroll students in the FLVS, or individual students can sign up themselves with approval of their parents or guardian and a counselor in their regular school.

With open enrollment, students can begin courses in any week of the year. Once enrolled, they are, in a sense, on their own to complete their credit recovery program online, whenever and wherever they want, following a curriculum that meets state and district requirements. "Our motto is 'anytime, anyplace, any pace.' Students are rarely on the same page at the same time," says Pam Birtolo, chief learning officer at FLVS. "But it really should be 'any pace, almost.' We spend a lot of time explaining to students that 'any pace' denotes some forward movement. They can't spend two years in English 1," she adds.

Although some students work more rapidly, FLVS generally expects them to complete the equivalent of a regular semester-long course in about 18 weeks. But "kids have different lives, and sometimes they need more time. We try to limit it to a total of nine extra weeks if they need that much. What we're interested in is that they master the content," she declares.

The online courses are highly interactive, with little text and many assignments that are like mini-games. "There are different assignments that appeal to different learning modalities," Birtolo explains. Although textbooks are required for some courses, "we have worked very hard to eliminate ancillary materials from most of our courses," she says.

Courses are taught by full-time, certified and highly qualified teachers, "just like in a bricks-and-mortar school," says Birtolo. But they are designed so that teachers and students never meet directly, although they could if they wanted to, she says. Still, "our unique identifier is the amount of connection and contact a teacher has with a student," which can happen by phone, e-mail and instant messaging, Birtolo says. Students can call teachers from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day, and there are scheduled monthly phone conversations between teachers, students and their parents. In addition to providing online assessments of student success, teachers conduct "discussion-based assessments" by phone during courses. "When we were in school, they were called oral exams," Birtolo explains.

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Other states offer similar online programs. In Georgia, students have two options. In the Georgia Department of Education credit recovery program, students complete courses with limited teacher involvement, using Flash video presentations and Web-based learning activities. In the Georgia Virtual School, part of the state education agency's Office of Technology Services, teachers lead the instruction using asynchronous online courses.

Blended Approach

Then there are many districts that combine face-to-face and online instruction in their credit recovery programs. "I think the blended model is the most effective because you get the best of both worlds," says Jamie Sachs, associate director of the educational technology cooperative at the Southern Regional Education Board. "Kids come into a lab, they work through the material, and a teacher is there to assist them if they need it."

Credit Recovery Solutions

Many of the companies listed below provide online credit recovery solutions that are similar in concept but offer a wide range of options depending on districts' needs and wants. Prices vary

That's how it works in the Omaha (Neb.) Public Schools, where computer labs in each of the district's seven high schools are the hubs of the program. Students go to one of the labs three hours once a week for a semester to regain the credits they need. Depending on their schedules, students can go to the labs at their own schools during regular school hours or to labs at other schools from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. or 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Omaha uses a learning management system, which is an e-learning platform that allows the district to create and manage its credit recovery curriculum without installing complex programs. Instead, the district acquires some content it needs from outside sources like the National Repository of Online Courses, which delivers content free to students and teachers at public Web sites like HippoCampus. Then it customizes the material to create digital content for master courses in core areas—English, math, social science and the physical sciences—and houses it in the district's own servers.

"Wherever we can get free content, we will. Then I can cherry-pick it apart and take what I need and pull it into the LMS and build a customized course," explains Mary Schlegelmilch, e-learning supervisor at the Omaha schools. That's how the master courses were created, she adds. She and other administrators found content related to the most important lessons for the students so they could gain the credits they needed and pass the district assessments.

Even with students working at their own pace on online programs, teachers who are present in the labs play a vital role, answering questions and "facilitating the learning," Schlegelmilch says. "If a student isn't understanding the concept, maybe has tried an assignment two or three times and just doesn't understand it, the teacher can differentiate that assignment in another manner to help the student understand it," she says.

For example, if a science student doesn't understand a simulated lab assignment online, she says, "the teacher can bring in the actual materials and help the student understand it." While text for most courses is online, "if a student has trouble reading it that way and asks for an actual textbook, we'll get it for them," she adds.

The instructors are regular Omaha schools' classroom teachers who are paid an additional \$24.50 per hour for their credit recovery work, Schlegelmilch says. "We believe the relationships that teachers can build with their students are important, and the face-to-face time they have allows the students to grow. The teacher can see when they are struggling and can help build a relationship so students feel comfortable in their learning," she declares.

Similarly, in Volusia County, Fla., each of the district's nine high schools has its own credit recovery lab where students go, either during a daytime class period or during a period after school if their regular schedule is full. Thirty students are in the labs at one time, taking English, math, science and social studies courses, reports Carol Downing, the district's credit retrieval specialist.

Volusia uses an Apex Learning program, and the company trains the district's teachers in how to use it. Downing explains that teams of Volusia content teachers, headed by the district's content-area specialists, evaluate all courses that Apex provides and align them to state standards and Volusia's curriculum. In the labs, students follow assignment sheets that Volusia has developed for the courses. "When students start seeing that they are making progress through these assignment sheets, it empowers them to succeed," Downing declares.

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While students make their way through the courses on their computers, the teacher of a course, who also is in the lab, plays a critical role, “because students still need support,” says Downing. “The teacher plays the role of any teacher, explaining concepts and acting as a motivator. There isn’t a curriculum around that really imparts knowledge by itself. We know that even in the virtual communities,” she asserts. Without the involvement of teachers, she continues, students in credit recovery programs “would fail yet again.”

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Not even the most intensive credit recovery programs can keep all students from dropping out. But along with pressure on districts to help students stay in school and graduate on time, Patrick says there also is more transparency in data so that parents, as well as district and community leaders, “can see from school to school where the big dropout problems are.” And that, says Patrick, is helping them to seek credit recovery options “that work for the kids”—and the districts too.

Alan Dessoiff is a contributing writer for District Administration.