

CRITICAL ISSUES ABOUT ONLINE CREDIT RECOVERY PROGRAMS IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

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Elementary, middle, and high schools are rapidly expanding digital instruction in the hopes of creating more efficient instructional methods and improving student outcomes. One spreading form of digital instruction uses online courses or courses that blend online and in-person elements to assist high school students who have missed or need to retake courses. These “online credit recovery” programs help students earn the credits they need for a high school degree.

What are the implications of such programs for student learning and educational outcomes? Our ongoing research on digital educational tools in K-12 instruction offers some insights. Our findings have important implications for students, schools, and policymakers who are devoting public funds to these efforts.

Emerging Patterns in a Case Study

In a case study of online credit recovery in a large, urban school district, we examine which students are assigned to take online courses and their behavior within the courses. To explore differential academic gains, we have analyzed more than five million records of more than 30,000 online instructional sessions across three years. We have identified **four broad types of student behavior** among users of these programs:

- **Engaged users** had the least amount of idle time between indicators of active use, such as clicks. They completed more activities per day in less session time and completed their courses in fewer sessions.
- **Moonlighters** were also relatively productive users, but approximately four-fifths of their log-ins occurred outside of the regular school day.
- **Nominal exerts** spent more idle time in the system than the previous two groups of students; they logged in for more sessions per course and completed fewer activities per day.
- **Incompatible strugglers** also made limited progress with more idle time, but (compared to nominal exerts) were more likely to be in 9th or 10th grade and were often enrolled in math courses known to be challenging to take online. According to their teachers, these students demonstrated lower rates of personal discipline and academic preparation.

Across all four student user types, we found that a higher proportion of idle time in online instructional sessions was strongly associated with lower grades and rates of completing and passing courses. Students who were more often absent from school did worse in online courses; students in 11th and 12th grades performed better than students in lower grades.

All types of students completed course content more efficiently in more recent school years, but we found no positive associations between online course-taking and overall student achievement in math and reading scores, credits earned, or grade point averages.

Drawing from our study, the district worked to improve student use of online instruction. For example, students were encouraged to take notes during online videos, and instructors were asked to ensure that student had notes in hand before taking quizzes or tests. In addition, instructors were encouraged to hold weekly check-ins with students, and teachers gained access to tools through which they could better monitor student progress. If students are to make academic gains, instructors need adequate resources to supplement online content – including the training and support to provide targeted help in responsive ways.

Critical Considerations for Schools and Districts

Our study of online credit recovery courses suggests ways for district staff, vendors, school leaders, classroom instructors and students to improve online instructional programs.

- **Define clear priorities.** Is the program focused primarily on helping students recover credits? Anytime, anywhere access to courses could support this goal. Alternatively, if student learning is the primary focus, educational leaders might encourage active and authentic student engagement. Our research suggests that learning is enhanced by integrating online and in-person interactions. This requires teachers with expertise in course content, as well as the ability to deal with technical issues in online platforms.
- **Be clear about additional goals.** Beyond academic goals for online courses, teachers may have other objectives such as providing a welcoming instructional space for students who are at risk of dropping out and would not otherwise be in school. Clarity about multiple goals can help teachers set expectations and strategies.
- **Develop the competencies classroom staff need to support students working online.** Program administrators and professional programs should help teachers develop general technical skills and provide targeted training about navigating specific software platforms. Teachers in credit recovery program also need training to meet the social and emotional needs of students and manage classrooms using online tools. Even in programs where instructional content is delivered entirely online, access to a knowledgeable instructor may facilitate targeted assistance and deeper learning.

Technology is often cited as a means to create student-centered learning opportunities, but the extent to which that goal is realized depends on how digital tools are integrated into school programs. Online courses that promise individualized pacing or content do not guarantee personalized learning. That happens only when students gain the preparation and discipline they need to handle these courses – and when they receive the necessary feedback and opportunities to relearn content in new or more in-depth ways. Many forms of personalized learning require teachers to provide in-person support and further explanations of the instructional content.

In sum, online credit recovery programs can facilitate learning for all students and help students who need to complete additional course credits to graduate. But there is no technological magic wand. We find that the most effective programs blend learning approaches to allow students to benefit from both online and in-person instruction in an integrated manner.

Read more about this project and see related research briefs and publications on the [Improving the Effectiveness of Digital Educational Tools Website](#).