# Research in Practice

**Series IV: Dropout Prevention**

**Paper *No. 2***

## Credit Recovery Programs: Recommendations for Effective Implementation

By Thomas G. Fetsco, Ph.D., Shawn Donnelly, M.A., Wenjie Tang, M.A.

**Background**

High school students can encounter a variety of personal, social, academic, and economic challenges that stand in the way of their successful completion of high school. As these students fail classes and therefore find themselves falling behind their peers in the number of credits they have earned for graduation, dropping out can seem like their only option. In response, high schools around the country have instituted options that allow students to "recover" the credits they need for on-time graduation. Although these credit recovery programs attempt to meet a pressing and real need, they are not without controversy. The purpose of this paper is to review the research on credit recovery programs with the intent of identifying recommendations for those who would implement them.

**Credit Recovery Defined**

Zinth (2011) defines credit recovery as an alternative to course repetition for students who have failed a high school course needed for graduation. Students who enroll in credit recovery have typically met the "seat time" requirement for a course they have not passed, so they earn credit for that

course by demonstrating that they have mastered relevant state standards through credit recovery (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Although Zinth's definition captures the general nature of credit recovery programs, there is considerable variability in how these programs are designed and implemented. Credit recovery courses are delivered in a variety of formats including face-to face, blended, and online courses. They also vary in terms of course length, grade levels served, location (on or off-campus), scheduling, student selection criteria, and criteria for credit recovery (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012; Muir, 2006; Zehr, 2010; Zinth, 2011). Given the diversity of delivery models for credit recovery programs, it may be better to think of "credit recovery" as a goal or desired outcome of a program rather than as a specific type of instructional intervention. Schools will want to select or design programs that are most likely to be effective in their context.

**Research on Effectiveness of Credit Recovery Programs**

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse reviewed available research on the effectiveness of credit recovery programs and concluded the following (2015, p. 1).

> Because no studies meet WWC group design features at this time, the WWC is unable to draw any conclusions based on research about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of credit recovery programs on students who attend middle school, junior high school, or high school, are "at risk" of dropout, or who have dropped out of school.

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The WWC is not alone in its finding. Others have written about the need for additional high quality research on the effectiveness of these programs (Heppen, et al. 2012; McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012; Muir, 2006; Watson & Gemin, 2008; Zinth, 2011). According to McCabe and St. Andrie (2012, p. 1), credit recovery programs are a "highly decentralized, unregulated, and under-researched dropout prevention initiative."

The current status of the research on credit recovery programs does not automatically lead to the conclusion that schools should avoid using them. Although the research is inconsistent and incomplete, there are enough encouraging results from both educators and the companies that market these programs to suggest the potential for positive effects. Also, current and emerging credit recovery programs may be found to be more effective than alternatives for recovering credits that have been thoroughly researched. For example, grade retention generally has been found to be ineffective for improving student achievement and it is also inconsistent with

the goal of on-time graduation, and summer school also has been found to have minimal impact on student success (Hattie, 2009). The current status of research on credit recovery programs does suggest, however, that schools need to proceed cautiously by using available evidence strategically. Educators will need to monitor their efforts carefully, and researchers and practitioners will need to collaborate in order to evaluate credit recovery programs more rigorously.

**Recommendations Based on Best Available Evidence**

The literature on credit recovery programs provides a starting point for those who are considering implementing these programs. The recommendations provided in this paper have to be considered carefully in terms of the special nature of individual school contexts, and may need to be re-evaluated as the literature on credit recovery matures.

**1. It's important to start early**. There seems to be a consensus that it is better to start credit recovery programs in the first year of high school because students who struggle academically during this first year have an increased risk of dropping out (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Eddy, 2013; Johnson, 2015; Legters & Kerr, 2011). Ninth grade students may not fully understand the concept of "credits for graduation" and consequently not perceive the need for recovering credit until the possibility of not graduating becomes more imminent. Therefore, discussions with freshmen who have failed one or two courses about the consequences of waiting too long to recover credits may be warranted.

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**2. Credit recovery courses must have sufficient rigor.** Concerns have been raised about the lack of academic rigor in credit recovery programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Davis, 2015; McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012; Preble, 2006; Watson & Gemin, 2008). The general concern is that students receive a less challenging curriculum in order to maximize the probability that they successfully recover credits. The net result is that, while students have earned the credit, they are not prepared for their future. To avoid this possibility, prior to implementing a credit recovery program, the district should review the curriculum of programs under consideration for rigor and alignment to state standards. Also, students can be required to demonstrate their learning by passing an appropriately challenging final exam that is aligned to the relevant standards (Watson & Gamin, 2008).

**3. Student motivation is likely to be an issue.** Students who enroll in credit recovery programs are potentially a diverse group. For example, some students may be doing well overall but have experienced difficulty with the

content of a specific course. Others may have fallen behind in school due to personal or health issues. However, it is likely that a large portion of students who enroll in credit recovery programs will demonstrate motivational issues that will need to be addressed.

James McPartland (1994) from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students has provided a typology for sources of student motivation to stay in school. This four-category typology can be useful for thinking about key motivational elements that dropout prevention programs, including credit recovery efforts, might need to address.

A. **Opportunities for success in schoolwork**—Credit recovery programs can enhance these students' opportunities for school success by providing academic supports in the form of tutoring or supplemental instruction, by providing frequent feedback opportunities for students, by allowing students to progress at a rate that is appropriate for them, and by providing alternative routes for successful course completion.

**B.** **Human climate of caring and support**—Relationships students form with adults at school are extremely important for their sense of belonging. Schools should endeavor to staff credit recovery programs with teachers and/or paraprofessionals who can relate effectively to students who may have disengaged from school.

**C.** **Relevance of school to students' community and future—**Students may disengage from school if school learning seems irrelevant to their life or their plans for after high school. Schools might address this by infusing college and career content into credit recovery lessons and by finding ways to personalize learning.

**D.** **Help with personal problems**—Students often have personal, social, and economic issues that they are trying to balance with their need to do well in school. Schools can help here by providing flexible scheduling for credit recovery, and by connecting students with appropriate services.

"Staff credit recovery programs with teachers and/or paraprofessionals who can relate effectively to students…"

**4. Careful consideration needs to be given to course delivery format.** Course delivery format is a key decision in planning or selecting a credit recovery program. In general, there are three main delivery formats for credit recovery classes: online, blended, and face-to-face. Face-to face-courses tend to mirror traditional course structures with a single teacher delivering instruction to students. Blended courses have both online and face-to-face components. Online courses are completely delivered through the computer. Both the literature on credit recovery programs and research on online learning tend to be trending in favor of blended courses. In a recent meta-analysis of the effects of online and blended learning, Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki (2013) found that students in online courses performed modestly better than students in face-to-face classes. However, the differences were significant only for blended courses. According to Watson & Gamin (2008), most, but not all online programs used with at-risk students are blended courses, which provide students with the possibility of additional, individualized support.

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**5. Teachers have a pivotal role in the success of blended learning.** The pivotal role of teachers/facilitators in online learning has been noted multiple times in the literature (Cavanaugh, 2009; Stassie, 2013; and Waters, 2010). The nature of teachers' important role in successful blended learning was the focus of a study conducted in 2012 by *Marzano Research Laboratory (MRL)* with *Edmentum Online Solutions.* The Marzano Instructional Model was used as a framework for identifying teachers' instructional practices that were connected to student success. More successful teachers clearly communicated learning goals and expectations, and made sure students had the required class materials. They also actively monitored students' learning and provided support for students by answering their questions, offering encouragement, connecting to students individually, helping students keep track of their own progress, and by helping students progress at their own rate.

**6. Appropriate infrastructures need to be in place.** Many researchers, e.g., Meyer and Barefield (2010), note the importance of addressing *infrastructure issues* in order to make credit recovery programs successful. Mileaf, Paul, Rukobo & Zyko (2012) recommend the creation of a credit recovery team consisting of administrators, teachers, and counselors to oversee the planning and implementation of credit recovery programs. In terms of the physical infrastructure, lighting, space considerations, appropriate seating, and an environment that reduces distractions are all important to the success of credit recovery programs (Huckabee, 2010).

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**7. Student readiness for blended learning needs to be assessed.** Mileaf, Paul, Rukobo, & Zyko (2012) suggest that it is important to determine students' access to technology before implementing off-campus technology based programs. Whether on or off campus, students may also need various supports to be successful in online environments including orientations to the technology, access to a technology support staff, and clear guidance about course rules and expectations. Students may also need instruction in the independent learning and time management skills necessary for success in an online environment.

**8. Credit recovery programs need to be evaluated.** Due to the current status of research on credit recovery programs**,** schools will need to be prepared to evaluate their credit recovery efforts. It would be optimal if they worked with researchers to develop a rigorous evaluation plan that would increase knowledge about evidence-based practices. Minimally, however, schools will want to collect evidence that allows them to be effective stewards of their own programs. In framing their evaluations of their own programs, schools want to make sure that they take a comprehensive view of program effects. For example, the number of credits recovered may not tell the whole picture if students served by these programs are more likely to struggle with state-mandated assessments of standards than their peers who have earned their credits in the traditional classroom. The following questions adapted from McCabe & St Andrie, 2012, p. 3) may be useful in framing a more comprehensive evaluation.

- *Who are the students who are referred for credit recovery?*
- *Are there particular curricular areas that seem most problematic to students?*
- *When students successfully recover credit, how does their performance in subsequent courses in the same content area compare to students who earned credit the first time they took a class?*
- *Is the graduation rate for students who participate in credit recovery different from students who do not?*
- *If there are multiple programs to help students graduate on time, which of them seem to be most effective?*
- *Are we offering credit recovery opportunities early enough in students' high school careers?*
- *Are there ways to modify what we are doing to make it more effective?*

**Summary of Key Recommendations**

1. **START EARLY:** Begin credit recovery programs as early as ninth grade. A good place to start is with ninth grade courses that are prerequisite to later courses (e.g., algebra I and ELA9). Discuss with freshmen who have failed these classes how credits work, how content builds from course to course, and the importance of recovering these credits as soon as possible for on-time graduation.
2. **ENSURE MASTERY:** Credit recovery is an important goal, but it is not the only goal. Put structures in place to make sure that students are mastering key content in these courses.
3. **MOTIVATE STUDENTS:** Consider students' motivational needs in planning credit recovery programs. For example, allowing students to move successfully through a course at different rates is likely to be motivational for students who doubt they can recover all the credits they need. Also, connecting content to students' career interests may help.
4. **PEOPLE MATTER:** A credit recovery team for both planning and implementation of credit recovery is optimal. Curriculum specialists and master teachers to ensure rigor, counselors or social workers to help students with personal and social issues, and on-site teachers or para-professionals who are able to establish rapport with, and motivate, at-risk students are important to include on a credit recovery team.
5. **PREPARE STUDENTS:** Help students develop the technological and independent learning skills they need to be successful.
6. **EVALUATE:** Develop a research and evaluation plan as part of your credit recovery program.

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***About the Authors:***

**Thomas G. Fetsco**, Ph.D. is the Director of the Initiative on the Study of College and Career Readiness. His research interests include cognitive theory and classroom learning and program evaluation.

**Wenjie Tang**, M.A. is a research associate for the Initiative on the Study of College and Career Readiness. Her research interests include factors that influence college-readiness of minority and first-generation students and theory-based program evaluation.

**Shawn Donnelly**, M.A. is a research associate for the Initiative on the Study of College and Career Readiness. His research interests include understanding the roles of intersectionality, individual and community strengths, and empowerment in addressing issues of access to postsecondary education.

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