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Online Options for 'Credit Recovery' Widen

Districts Turn to Commercial Providers and Virtual Schools to Help Students Make It to Graduation

By Andrew Trotter

Under pressure to raise graduation rates, some high schools are turning to online courses to help faltering students revive their academic careers and retrieve the credits they need to earn their diplomas.

As alternatives to remedial lessons, summer school, and other traditional ways of getting struggling high school students back on track, technology-based options for credit recovery have been expanding.

"It's a huge area of growth, especially in the last three years," said Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the North American Council for Online Learning, a Vienna, Va.-based trade association for online schools. The group is preparing a white paper on "promising practices" in credit recovery that it plans to publish this year.

Most of the new credit-recovery options are online programs offered by virtual schools and commercial curriculum providers. They offer approaches to individualizing instruction that are targeted and packaged for credit recovery, according to the companies and other providers offering the programs.

With graduation day nearing in high schools across the country, students are working in such classes to cobble together the credits they need.

"Right now, my classroom is chaos," Kim Feltner, the teacher in charge of the credit-retrieval lab at Pine Ridge High School, in Volusia County, Fla., said last week. "I probably have 30 to 35 seniors who have six days to complete their course in order to participate in graduation ceremonies. They are in full panic mode."

Credit recovery, or credit retrieval, is usually defined as an in-school opportunity for students to earn academic credits that they have lost, or are about to lose, by failing a regular course.

Such options are available from an array of online-curriculum companies, such as Apex Learning Inc. and PLATO Learning Inc., as well as nonprofit providers such as the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School and the Atlanta-based Georgia Virtual School.

Providers say they tailor learning to individual students, by using flexible pacing and schedules, extra practice, frequent assessment, and robust monitoring and reporting on participation and progress, while also allowing openings for personal interaction with teachers.

Their learning-management systems tend to have such typical online tools as e-mail, online assessments, and databases. Courses mirror, and are cross-referenced to, states' academic standards.

Though complete, the courses in some cases are subdivided into short "learning objects" that can be pulled out to address gaps in individual students' understanding.

In many cases, the programs are billed as ways to enable students not only to salvage credit for a class, but also to develop skills and work habits that will contribute to their continued academic success.

Data Elusive

Overall statistics on credit-recovery participation are hard to come by. Course providers often do not ask students why they are enrolling in their courses.

The Florida Virtual School, a state-run online program for grades 6-12, found that 17 percent of its current in-state high school students enrolled for "grade forgiveness"—essentially because they have failed required courses, said Cindy L. Lohan, the FLVS "eSolutions manager."

"They need to get their previous grade forgiven—that's credit recovery," said Ms. Lohan, who markets FLVS online courses out of state. She added that student self-reported data are not always reliable, and that "the chances are the 17 percent number is a little low."

The virtual school, which expects its number of course enrollments to hit 100,000 this school year, also markets its online courses outside the state to school districts and other course providers. In the past year, Ms. Lohan said, "I became well aware many of our [out-of-state] students are taking our courses for credit recovery."

While national statistics are elusive, analysts say several forces are pushing school districts toward credit recovery.

One is a general push to raise graduation rates by many groups representing leaders from business, higher education, and state and local government.

Against that backdrop, the U.S. Department of Education recently proposed regulations that would change how school districts report graduation data under the No Child Left Behind Act, which may lead to increased scrutiny on those that graduate fewer seniors on time. (*See Education Week, April 9, 2008.*)

Another factor is financial, because districts lose state funding when students drop out or opt into alternative programs outside the district.

The impact on revenues can make districts more willing to enlist outside organizations to provide credit-recovery services, according to Marc Dean Millot, the editor of the *School Improvement Industry* newsletter, based in Alexandria, Va.

"We don't need a very high level of student success in order to break even for the district," said Mr. Millot, who also writes a blog, *edbizbuzz*, hosted on edweek.org.

Moreover, he said, many school leaders do not view the credit-recovery services as competition.

"If you're a business and trying to earn revenue, you'd like to do things that the district does not consider competition," Mr. Millot said. "The credit-recovery business is probably the least-competitive offering, particularly from the online or virtual school."

In a book slated for publication next month, the business author Clayton M. Christensen cites credit recovery as one of the most likely areas for technology-fueled "disruptive innovation" to find a foothold in K-12 education, because upstart online-learning providers can address the needs of students and families not being directly met by the local district. (*See Education Week, May 5, 2008.*)

Mr. Christensen, a business professor at Harvard University, and two co-authors

suggest in the book that credit recovery may be a proving ground for methods that will be adopted for regular education.

Outside Offerings

Seattle-based Apex Learning, better known for its online Advanced Placement courses, has broadened its course catalog in recent years to provide credit recovery, as well as dropout recovery, remediation, intervention, and alternative school programs.

To address students' different learning styles, its redesigned digital curriculum makes use of audio, video, graphics, images, and animations. On some sections, the students can tap brief audio lectures on the material, which can help students who read below grade level or for whom English is a second language.

Annotated readings and a method called "guided instruction" aim to improve reading comprehension. Other new features, such as graphic organizers and study sheets, are designed to help students complete schoolwork and learn good study habits.

PLATO Learning has shifted toward credit recovery after converting a curriculum business that had previously focused on computer-based remedial instruction in basic math and literacy skills.

During a five-year transition completed in 2006, the Minneapolis-based company developed a "personalized one-to-one model" of complete courses delivered online, said Todd Brekhus, a company executive.

The company has incorporated technologies and databases from other companies, such as a platform to manage learning and a database of state academic standards and textbooks that allows teachers to look up standards, and automatically assign content, based on an assessment.

The result, Mr. Brekhus said, is a browser-based "learning-management system that has assessment that can be structured around a course, so content can be assigned to students, and they can exempt out of content areas they know."

Some critics are concerned that the online credit-recovery options run the risk of simply shuffling students out the door without their having received the full value of a high school education.

But officials in the 66,000-student Volusia County district say their credit-retrieval program, which has operated for more than a decade using various outsider providers, has been fruitful for both students and schools.

"We have thousands of credits generated for thousands of students," said Chris Colwell, the district's deputy superintendent for instruction.

He said the district has reviewed its program regularly, changed providers when necessary, and used its own teachers and homegrown strategies, such as providing

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extra periods, special centers, counseling, flexible hours, and alternative settings. The district currently uses courses from Apex Learning.

Pine Ridge High

At Volusia County's Pine Ridge High School, Ms. Feltner manages the school's "Apex lab," which enrolls students from throughout the 2,200-student school. As students work on whichever of Apex Learning's courses they need, she offers academic support.

"I try to make it as fun as possible," she said. "I tell kids they are smarter than I am. There is nothing they cannot do, especially at their age; young brains are like sponges.

Just because they cannot do it in a regular classroom, doesn't mean they cannot do it."

Ms. Feltner said students sometimes enter the lab believing that learning on computers will be easy. That's not necessarily true, she said, noting that Apex Learning's courses demand a lot of reading.

After realizing how much work is required, "you'll see them put their head down in the first two weeks, if they start to feel overwhelmed," Ms. Feltner said.

Besides her own observations, Ms. Feltner relies on the online system's frequent assessments and monitoring tools to signal problems; for example, she gets an immediate e-mail whenever a student fails an online quiz.

"It is my job to analyze very quickly who needs a little more assistance," she said.

Infrequently, she will end up steering a student to the Florida Virtual School's courses, which in this district students would have to take at home.

"I personally think that if you have a student who may need more structure and guidance, they are better off in the Apex lab, rather than at home without a parent, or with one without the skills to guide them," she said.

With the semester nearing the finish line, Ms. Feltner said she reassures the 12th graders that even if they complete their final courses too late to cross the stage with their classmates, they can still earn a 2008 diploma. Even so, she said, not sharing in the celebration "is a devastating prospect" to them.

"It's end-of-the-year panic time," she said.

Coverage of pathways to college and careers is underwritten in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Education Week is published 44 times per year by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Subscriptions: U.S.: \$79.94 for 44 issues. Subscriptions: Canada: \$135.94 for 44 issues.