ONLINE CREDIT RECOVERY PROGRAMS

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School districts throughout the United States have implemented prevention strategies to reduce high school dropout rates among at-risk students. During the 2014–15 school year, the U.S. Department of Education conducted the *National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate*. Data reveal that credit recovery is a common method used among public schools to reduce dropout rates. The survey defines credit recovery as "a strategy that encourages at-risk students to re-take a previously failed course required for high school graduation and earn credit if the student successfully completes the course requirements." That year, 89 percent of U.S. high schools offered at least one credit recovery course. Approximately 15 percent of all U.S. high school students participated in at least one credit recovery course.[1] These programs not only benefit individual students, they also improve school districts by reducing overall dropout rates.[2]

In recent decades, in line with improvements in technology, schools have increasingly opted for Online Credit Recovery Programs (OCRPs) over traditional face-to-face courses. Despite sharing a common goal with traditional face-to-face programs– providing a pathway for students to get back on track, to avoid failing additional courses and falling further behind, and to graduate ready for college and/or a career–questions have emerged regarding instructional methods and the efficacy of OCRPs. To date, research on OCRPs is limited because "few states formally track or report student participation in online learning."[3] The few studies that do exist mostly compare the effectiveness–in terms of success rates–of online versus face-to-face programs. Few data are available about the percentage of face-to-face instruction used in blended programs. Similarly, few studies address the certification status of staff members working with students in blended programs. This Research Brief examines what little research does exist about OCRPs. Specifically, it focuses on instructional methods, instructor certification, and program effectiveness.

OCRP INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS

Credit recovery programs appear in various forms. Traditionally, schools have conducted credit recovery courses in a face-to-face setting led by a certified teacher instructor during the regular school year or during summer. During the 2014–15 school year, 46 percent of all high schools offered face-to-face credit recovery programs.

In recent decades, online credit recovery (including both online-only and blended models) has grown in popularity due to increased access to and use of computer technology and the internet. Additionally, federal legislation–both the *No Child Left Behind* and *Every Student Succeeds* acts–required states to set goals to improve high school graduation rates, leading schools to find cost-effective strategies through OCRPs. Online credit recovery program instruction can be wholly online, with no in-person assistance, or it can be blended, meaning a student receives partial face-to-face instruction.[4] In 2014–15, 71 percent of all high schools offered online-only credit recovery courses, and 42 percent offered blended-model OCRPs.[5] The online-only model was the most popular across all district locales (city, suburban, or rural), although face-to-face and blended OCRPs were more likely to be found in urban districts than in rural or suburban areas.

Proponents argue that OCRPs offer students and schools flexibility and autonomy, are more engaging than face-to-face instruction, provide feedback and pacing, allow for individualized learning, and are cost effective. Critics contend that OCRPs have several limitations, such as at-risk students needing supports including scaffolding and motivation that a 100 percent online program may not provide and their possible lack of content and instruction that is inclusive of multicultural and diverse learners. Also, critics question the overall effectiveness of OCRPs to provide rigorous instruction to prepare students for college and/ or career readiness. To account for these limitations, the U.S.

Department of Education recommends "blended learning models…designed to leverage the benefits of online programs by adding organizational structures, personal instruction strategies, and student support strategies."[6] Unfortunately, most states do not report data regarding credit recovery and, as a result, it is currently impossible to know the extent to which blended OCRPs are incorporating face-to-face instruction.

Similarly, the National Education Association supports blended learning models. As stated in NEA's Policy Statement on Digital Learning–

> *Optimal learning environments should neither be totally technology free, nor should they be totally online and devoid of educator and peer interaction. The Association believes that an environment that maximizes student learning will use a "blended" and/or "hybrid" model situated somewhere along a continuum between these two extremes… The Policy Statement supports maximizing student learning by using both technology and real life educators in the process. It rejects the idea that effective learning can take place completely online and without interaction with certified teachers and fully qualified faculty.[7]*

OCRP Instructor Qualifications

Across all types of credit recovery programs, classroom teachers are the most commonly observed type of instructor, with 70 percent of high schools reporting their use.[8] Just over half (51%) of schools reported using teachers provided by an online course provider, and about a quarter (26% and 25%, respectively) employed other school staff or resource lab teachers as OCRP instructors. Urban schools reported the highest rate of classroom teacher use (84%) and rural schools the lowest (61%). Conversely, rural schools reported the highest use of teachers provided by online course providers (55%) while urban schools reported the lowest (43%). Suburban schools were in the middle on both measures. Unfortunately, data that would allow one to compare these data by program time (face-to-face, blended, or online only) are not publicly available.

Although we do not have access to systematic data about the use of certified teachers *vs.* other staff in OCRPs, one study has established the importance of using certified teachers in these settings.[9] The American Institutes for Research, in conjunction with the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and funded by the U.S. Department of Education, conducted a randomized control trial through which 1,224 first-year high school students in Chicago were randomly assigned to either

an online or a face-to-face credit recovery program for Algebra I. The Chicago OCRP included online interaction with a teacher provided by the online content provider (Aventa/K12) and interaction with an in-class mentor who staffed the computer lab or classroom where the OCRP was held. These mentors did not need to be certified in mathematics, although about half were, and they were not required to provide instructional support but were welcome to do so if they desired.

The Chicago study classified mentors who reported spending at least 20 percent of their time instructing students as "instructionally supportive." Fifteen of the 36 online courses were facilitated by mentors in this category. The instructionally supportive mentors were more likely to hold mathematics certification, with 63 percent of supportive mentors having subject-area certification. On the other hand, certification was no guarantee of instructional support, as 48 percent of less-instructionally supportive mentors had mathematics certification.

Researchers found key differences in student outcomes depending on whether an instructionally supportive mentor was present. Students with supportive mentors progressed through the online course at a slower rate, attempting 65 percent of assessments compared to 77 percent for students without instructionally supportive mentors. This slower pace was not a detriment to success, however. Students receiving instructional support passed 40 percent of tests, compared with 32 percent for those without a supportive mentor. At the end of the course, students in the online courses with instructionally supportive mentors had credit recovery rates similar to students in face-to-face courses and higher than students in the online courses without supportive mentors.

These findings–and the knowledge that non-certified personnel are staffing many credit recovery programs at least in part–provide evidence to support a key part of NEA Resolution B-32, which focuses on alternative programs for students who are at-risk or have special needs–

> *Teachers, related service providers, and administrators should receive necessary training in diagnostic processes and alternative methods of teaching and learning, including culturally responsive teaching practices. Appropriate training should also be provided to education support professionals. In addition, parents/guardians, school security personnel, and other school community members should be encouraged to acquire the training to effectively meet the needs of these students.[10]*

OCRP Effectiveness

Research on the effectiveness of OCRPs has produced mixed results. This is partly due to how researchers define and measure *effectiveness*. The goal of OCRPs is to provide a pathway for students to get back on a graduation track and to deter dropping out. However, factors beyond course failure–chronic absenteeism is one example–can contribute to school dropout rates. Critics have argued that OCRPs do not provide the rigor of traditional in-class, face-to-face instruction, thereby leaving students unprepared for college and/or careers. Therefore, while students may recover a needed credit, they might still perform poorly on course or standardized exams.[11] Below is an overview of available research on OCRP effectiveness.

MassGrad Initiative. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education selected Massachusetts for its High School Graduation Initiative–a federal program aimed at reducing school dropout rates. The Nellie Mae Foundation, in conjunction with the UMass Donahue Institute, conducted a study on the effectiveness of the MassGrad Initiative from 2011 to 2015. In all, researchers selected 24 Massachusetts high schools that had above average dropout rates to compare the effectiveness of credit recovery programs. Fourteen schools implemented a blended OCRP and 10 schools implemented a face-to-face program. Researchers found that OCRP students tended to remain in school during the program and were more likely to graduate than were their face-to-face counterparts. However, online participants scored lower overall on state standardized exams than did students in the face-to-face program.[12]

Chicago Public Schools. During the 2011 and 2012 summer session, 17 public high schools in Chicago, Illinois, offered both blended and face-to-face credit recovery courses. Schools randomly assigned 1,224 ninth graders needing credit recovery for Algebra I to one of the two courses. Researchers compared the effectiveness of each credit recovery program. Students reported no difference in their level of engagement between the two courses. On average, students in the online course scored lower on the end-of-course exam compared to students in the face-to-face section. Online students earned lower grades than did their face-to-face counterparts. Moreover, 77 percent of face-to-face students successfully recovered credit for Algebra I compared to 66 percent of online students. Overall, face-to-face instruction was more effective in the short-term. However, researchers found that there was no significant long-term difference between students enrolled in either course. Although most students recovered credits no matter the instructional style, "these courses do not appear to change students' generally low-performing trajectories." This may indicate that credit recovery alone is not overly effective for producing the kind of learning environment required to substantively reduce dropout rates and prepare at-risk students for college and/or careers. Credit recovery in conjunction with other programs may be more effective.[13]

Florida Virtual School. Beginning in 1997, Florida established the nation's first statewide virtual school. Since then, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has remained the largest program in the United States. A 2015 study on FLVS's credit recovery compared successful completion rates to traditional face-to-face programs. Comparatively, students "were more likely to earn a C or better in online credit recovery courses than in face-to-face courses in grades 9–11." English Language Learners were the only students that showed no significant difference in success between online and face-to-face courses. Significantly, this study "does not provide causal evidence that online learning is better than face-to-face instruction" given that it was not a randomized study. Students had already enrolled in either FLVS or a traditional brick-and-mortar school. The researchers recommended further study.[14]

North Carolina Virtual Public School. North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) began operation in 2007. In 2008, NCVPS began its online credit recovery program. By 2012, the credit recovery program–using blended learning–was serving 88 percent of North Carolina's school districts. A 2016 study compared success rates among different demographic student groups enrolled, finding that "across all courses, the NCVPS credit recovery students in the sample years reached proficiency on their end-of-course exam retests at lower rates and scored lower" than students in face-to-face credit recovery programs. NCVPS recovery students also graduated at a slightly lower rate (76%) than face-to-face students (77.7%). However, comparing demographic data, Black and Hispanic students in the NCVPS program graduated at higher rates (78.8% and 83.7%, respectively) than White NCVPS students (73.5%). Like other studies, the researchers recommended further study.[15]

CONCLUSIONS

The news media have begun to focus on OCRPs–some stories reveal positive aspects of online learning while others warn of concern. However, overshadowing OCRP pros and cons are the overwhelming number of things we simply do not know about credit recovery. Because credit recovery programs currently in practice are so varied and their implementation so malleable, the available data point in no conclusive direction. Especially as regards data collection and program evaluation, OCPRs are currently a research topic with far more questions than answers.[16]

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All links are current as of June 20, 2018.

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