Practice Outpacing Policy?

CREDIT RECOVERY IN AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Nat Malkus

NOVEMBER 2019

Executive Summary

In recent years, many journalistic exposés and research reports have raised concerns about the quality of credit recovery programs, which are available in about 75 percent of US high schools and serve about 6 percent of students. Stories relay how schools from Los Angeles to Washington, DC, have used the system of makeup courses to boost graduation rates, and some have even reported having separate requirements for student-athletes seeking National Collegiate Athletic Association scholarships. Among these reports, however, are often lapses in details about the actual district policies governing credit recovery. While a handful of studies have examined the quality of specific programs, it is hard to tell whether they broadly represent credit recovery programs or are instead merely examples of the worst of them.

The purpose of this report is to take a closer look at credit recovery policies in American public school districts across the country. Our research team contacted a nationally representative sample of 200 districts that had high participation rates of credit recovery in the spring and summer of 2019 and asked questions about the policies governing their credit recovery programs—including when credit recovery is offered, whether it is administered online, and whether the credit recovery grade students earn replaces their original failing grade.

This data collection, which yielded an 84 percent response rate, found that 95 percent of responding districts offer credit recovery online and 87 percent offer it year-round. Over half (54 percent) do not require failing grades to participate, and 51 percent replace the original grade with the credit recovery grade. Moreover, 68 percent of responding districts do not have seat-time requirements, and 61 percent allow students to skip lessons by taking pretests, thus allowing students to complete credit recovery courses at their own pace.

Taken individually, these policies could be justifiable for certain districts' circumstances and needs. Taken together, however, the pattern of highly expansive and flexible district policies offers little comfort about the rigor of credit recovery. To prevent credit recovery from doing more harm than good, districts need to establish clear policies focused on increasing rigor rather than just flexibility. By taking a stronger stand on rigorous credit recovery policies, districts have a better chance of ensuring these programs provide quality instruction, not just an easy ticket to graduation.

Practice Outpacing Policy?

CREDIT RECOVERY IN AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Nat Malkus

After a decade of education policy heavily focused on college and career readiness and boosting postsecondary enrollment, the primary approaches to gauging high school quality remain narrowly focused on two available measures: test scores and high school graduation rates. Test scores have become increasingly unpopular due to a sense that high-stakes tests drive unhealthy competition and detract from other valuable school programs and for their stubborn resistance to change. But graduation rates are easy to love because they do not have such obvious negative consequences on schooling—and because they keep going up.

Between 2011 and 2017, US graduation rates rose from 79 to 84 percent, an all-time high and the fifth record in a row since the federal government redefined how graduation rates are calculated and reported.[1] Those record numbers have naturally drawn a lot of attention and praise—and deservedly so when they reflect that school systems are reducing dropouts and increasing numbers of students who leave ready for college or a career. However, like high-stakes tests, pressure to improve graduation rates can create perverse incentives for schools. This makes knowing *how* schools are making them rise as important as knowing that they are rising.

As graduation rates have been on the rise, so have credit recovery programs. These programs provide makeup courses, often involving online instruction, that allow students who have fallen behind or failed a high school class to earn credits and get back on track to graduate without having to retake the original course. Of course, makeup courses are not new,

as summer school and repeating courses are long-existing options most adults remember from high school. But efforts to build quicker and more flexible programs to get lagging students back on track to graduate have gained momentum in recent years—so has the market for online services that facilitate them. The growth of credit recovery programs over time is difficult to assess with available data, but the programs have spread far and wide. In 2016, about three in four US high schools offered some kind of credit recovery program, and about 6 percent of high school students participated in one.[2]

The rise of credit recovery programs has brought more attention, and scrutiny, around their execution and effectiveness. As David Loewenberg notes in *Education Next,* increased government and private investments to expand tech in schools has catalyzed the boom of a "vast and lucrative education-technology market," which includes an array of online credit recovery providers for districts to choose from.[3] Such programs do help more students graduate; Loewenberg gives the example of Newburgh, New York, which saw its graduation rate rise from 66 to 78 in just five years after implementing online credit recovery.

But dramatic jumps like this are not necessarily something to celebrate. In Newburgh's case, a district attorney investigation revealed that faculty were using the program to fudge the numbers, including artificially changing grades and awarding credit to absent students.

Alarming accounts are increasingly common, with headlines such as "'Fail Me' School's Kids Can Take

Year's Worth of Classes in 6 Weeks," "School Saves 150 Failing Students with Quickie Online Courses," and "CMS Launches Investigation into Credit Recovery Center Allegations."[4] Article series from *Slate* and the *New York Post* have highlighted countless other examples.[5] In some cases, credit recovery has been part of major scandals, such as in 2017, when 15 percent of graduates in the District of Columbia received necessary credit through credit recovery despite never taking the original classes.[6]

Despite alarming anecdotes, the fact remains that little is known about the inner workings of credit recovery programs or their effectiveness. What are the actual policies governing these programs, and who is responsible for enforcing them? The limited information we have suggests that the answers vary widely across states and school districts. After all, these policy decisions generally fall to school districts, which typically establish credit recovery programs and ink contracts with online vendors. And different districts have different student populations, schedules, state requirements, budgets, and online programs to choose from. These factors allow for a wide range of credit recovery programs, as Loewenberg concisely lays out.

> There is also tremendous variation in what district and state credit-recovery policies, standards, and regulations look like—if they exist at all. . . . Some programs are condensed face-to-face classes, others are completely online, and still others are "blended," in which students work in a computer lab with support from a certified teacher. In some districts, courses are graded on a pass/fail basis, while in others students can earn scores up to 100 percent. Some districts cap the number of credit-recovery courses a student can

time at one time, while others don't. Some districts require students take paper-and-pencil assessments proctored by a teacher, while others allow testing to be completed at home on a computer. Some online classes are used to make up parts of a course, while others are designed as a wholesale replacement.[7]

Despite the good reasons to establish credit recovery programs and the strong reactions to programs that make the papers, it remains difficult to paint a clear picture of the credit recovery landscape in America. That difficulty stems from districts' strong incentives to improve graduation rates and push credit recovery far ahead of not only research but also the policy guiding these programs. The purpose of this report is to survey districts about the actual credit recovery policies in place in American public school districts.

What We Know About Credit Recovery

While anecdotal accounts raise concerns about the quality and rigor of credit recovery programs, a thin body of research gives us limited knowledge about the nature and application of these programs. Although limited, the existing research does answer some important questions.

First, who is actually taking these courses and where? Research indicates that credit recovery programs are widespread across the country, though not evenly. In a previous AEI report, I examined credit recovery participation in every high school across the nation and in each state.[8] I found that in the 2015–16 school year, nearly three-quarters of US public high

---

In Their Own Words: Satisfaction with Credit Recovery

"We are very happy with our credit recovery program, and it has helped many students graduate."

"[The program has received] criticism from teachers . . . teachers aren't as in control of content online programs. Everyone would like it to be better."

"We provide 30 hours of after-school teacher support. Attendance is mandatory. Students are excited upon successful completion of the course."

schools reported offering credit recovery programs and 6 percent of high school students participated in them.

However, credit recovery program participation varied considerably across schools. I categorized over 15,500 schools by their rates of student participation in credit recovery, from schools with no participation to schools with "peak" participation (18 percent of students or more). I found that about a third of schools had no credit recovery participation, while about 8 percent of schools had peak participation and served 39 percent of all credit recovery course takers nationwide. In other words, students taking credit recovery are highly concentrated in a small percentage of schools. A 2018 report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute reported the same average participation in public schools (although these programs are less common in charter schools), but incorporating more district-level information also showed substantial variation from one district to the next.[9]

Besides the populations using credit recovery, how have credit recovery programs affected student outcomes? A few studies have begun to address this question, and so far the answer is mixed. One paper by Samantha Viano found that in North Carolina, credit recovery increased students' likelihood of graduating as opposed to retaking a course in full.[10] However, the same study also found that students who took credit recovery received lower scores on the ACT and on their end-of-year exams in math, English, and biology, which the author interpreted to indicate that credit recovery actually reduced students' learning. A study by Carolyn Heinrich examining online course instruction (primarily but not exclusively credit recovery) in an urban midwestern district found that students directed to these courses tended to have lower reading levels, were less

academically motivated, and received lower math and reading scores than did other students.[11] According to these studies, the credit recovery programs not only drew in the lowest-performing students but also gave them little support to advance academically.

So, on one level, it looks like credit recovery programs are basically doing what they are supposed to: keeping students on track to graduate. But there is reason to believe that they are also doing what they are *not* supposed to: hindering or harming academic achievement.

On the difference between online and in-person credit recovery, current findings are also mixed. The most rigorous study on the topic is the Back on Track study, a four-year randomized control trial from the American Institutes for Research.[12] This study compared online to in-person credit recovery for about 1,200 students in 17 Chicago public high schools. Students who failed Algebra I in their freshman year were randomly assigned to either an online credit recovery course from the provider Aventa Learning or a face-to-face course. The study found that in the second year, students taking the online course had lower algebra test scores and grades than those taking the face-to-face course.[13] But in the longer term, none of the outcomes were statistically different: By the end of the four years, both groups of students were still one to two credits behind on average in fulfilling their math requirements, and less than half of both groups graduated on time.[14]

Another 2015 study from the Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast compared online and face-to-face credit recovery for high school students in Florida.[15] Based on two samples of transcript data from the Florida Department of Education, the study found that students in ninth through 11th grade taking online credit recovery were more likely to receive a C or higher

In Their Own Words: Credit Recovery and the NCAA

"Students who are on the NCAA pathway are not allowed to do pretests to test out of lessons."

"[We are] looking for increased ways to monitor seat time in online courses."

"[We use] Edgenuity and Apex . . . the only two online providers accepted by the NCAA."*

Note: *This statement may be inaccurate; other online providers, such as the Virtual High School, advertise NCAA approval.

What Does the NCAA Have to Do with Credit Recovery Policy?

Besides funding 90 championships in 24 sports and awarding almost $3.5 billion in academic scholarships annually, the NCAA also includes academic standards and support among its priorities for student-athletes.[16] According to its website, the organization offers tutoring, academic advising, and a degree completion program to help its members fulfill not just the *athlete* but also the *student* portion of their role.

For a student to compete in sports at an NCAA Division I or II school, that student must first receive certification from the NCAA's Eligibility Center, which has both athletic and academic requirements.[17] The Eligibility Center reviews students' transcripts, SAT or ACT scores, and other academic information to evaluate their academic standing and performance. The center ensures that high schools are not using academic shortcuts to push athletes into college sports teams. A series of regulations limit the courses eligible to be recognized credit; for example, credit-by-exam courses are not accepted.

Around 2008, the Eligibility Center staff began to notice a new and striking pattern on student transcripts. They found that many failing grades, or even Cs and Ds, were replaced with As and designated with a "CR," which further investigation revealed was a flag for credit recovery grades.

Before long, the scarcity of state guidelines governing credit recovery programs and the immense variety of such programs became clear. The Eligibility Center's director, Nicholas Sproull, has noted that while some credit recovery programs are rigorous, few meet the NCAA's academic standards. Some allow students to complete a year or a semester's worth of credit in a matter of days, hours, or even minutes. A common example, according to Sproull, involves a student finishing a biology course with an A– after just a four and half

hours spread over two days. In one case, a student completed a semester of Algebra I with an A in *one minute.* "The overwhelming majority of credit recovery programs fail to provide students the academic foundation for successful completion of academic work at the four-year-college level," writes Sproull.[18]

To guard against programs that essentially hand students a free A, in 2010 the NCAA established a set of requirements that credit recovery programs must meet to be approved by the Eligibility Center. Credit recovery courses must involve "ongoing and regular teacher-initiated interaction," they must have a "defined time period for completion," and in most cases, students must complete the entire course without skipping content.[19]

The reasoning behind these rules is clear. Without attentive teacher supervision or some sort of seat-time requirement, cases such as the Algebra I example might occur, in which students rush through content at a pace that calls their mastery of the subject into serious question. At the same time, it is understandable how the requirements could frustrate some schools and students. For instance, a student who has aced three-quarters of Algebra I but, for one reason or another, bombs the fourth quarter and ends up with a D or F for the course really only needs to make up a small portion of the course. But to meet NCAA standards, that student must spend a designated amount of time working through the entire course content all over again. Of course, as is the case with many academic programs and policies, allowing freedom and flexibility for all might benefit some but also leaves the door open for others to abuse the system.

These tensions raise questions about how to ensure that credit recovery is helping students graduate on time while also delivering rigorous academic instruction.

than were students taking the course face-to-face. The authors conceded, however, that the results do not tell whether the difference in grade outcomes was due to a difference in the programs' quality or other factors.

These reports are slowly filling in the gaps of what we know about credit recovery, but they still leave some big questions unanswered. Namely, what kind of policies actually govern credit recovery, and what kind of educational quality do credit recovery programs actually deliver? Individual studies tell us that certain programs could be doing more harm than good, but they cannot tell us how widespread these problems are. Surprisingly, the experience of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Eligibility Center gives a stronger sense—and more cause for concern—about the state of credit recovery throughout the country than academic researchers could imagine.

So, while we have some perspective about the populations taking credit recovery, the quality of certain programs, and the policies (or lack thereof) governing credit recovery, little is known about specific credit recovery policies and practices. The purpose of this report is to take a closer look at credit recovery policies in American public school districts across the country. To give an idea of how credit recovery might look across all districts, I focus on districts with high credit recovery participation rates, since those are the places where established policies would be the most applicable and necessary.

Data and Methods

To gauge credit recovery policies in high credit recovery participation districts, we randomly selected 200 school districts that reported 9.5 percent or more of their ninth- through 12th-grade students participated in credit recovery programs in the 2015–16 school year.[20] About 1,650 districts reported that level of participation. During the spring and summer of 2019, we initially contacted these districts with a phone call and followed up with nonrespondents using online surveys and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, wherein we asked 18 questions about their credit recovery program's format, eligibility requirements, administration, and assessment structure.

Our first few questions sought basic information about how a given public school district's credit recovery program is formatted, such as whether it is administered online and at when it is offered. Another group of questions examined the eligibility requirements for participating in credit recovery, such as whether a student needs to fail a course and whether the program is particularly targeted at 12th graders. A third set of questions looked at course delivery structure, such as the number of teachers administering a credit recovery course and the number of online courses providers used. Finally, some questions examined policies surrounding course progression (such as seat-time requirements) and course assessment.

After calling all districts, we followed up via email with those we could not reach over the phone. In our emails, we also inserted a link to an online response tool with the 18 questions so that districts could provide their credit recovery policy information online. In our final round of contacting districts that still had not responded, we submitted public information requests under the FOIA or equivalent state law. Of the 200 districts surveyed, 168 responded for an overall response rate of 84 percent. Fifty-four districts responded via phone call, 112 via online response tool, and two via public information request.

In Their Own Words: Credit Recovery Rigor

"These are tough courses—they're nothing to sneeze at."

"It's very difficult for students—in a bad way. They aren't really learning."

"We don't let kids slide through. [The program] makes sure kids know the content."

The responding districts represented about 5 percent of public high schools and 7 percent of high schools that offered credit recovery programs in 2015–16. The average participation rate in credit recovery in those responding districts was 13 percent. Just under 14 percent of all high school credit recovery participants in 2015–16 attended the approximately 760 schools in the responding districts.

This concentration of students reflects the concentration of credit recovery in a relatively small proportion of high schools and school districts and should reinforce the fact that these survey results represent the policies in districts with high participation credit recovery programs.[21] I focused on these districts because the size of the program should demand clear policies to guide them and because those policies affect an outsized portion of credit recovery participants.

What We Found

The survey results show that credit recovery is an expansive concept that includes programs that contrast sharply with the familiar, if outdated, image of summer school classes (Figure 1). Almost three in four districts surveyed refer to their programs as "credit recovery," demonstrating the
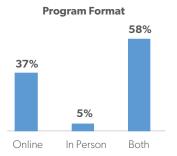
penetration that term has had on modern lexicon of public education. Like the terms "AP" or "career and technical education," "credit recovery" invokes a common conception of widely available programs.
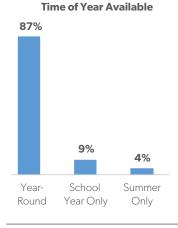
However, the term's penetration is not complete, with a quarter of responding districts reporting that they use a different name altogether to refer to their programs that others would call credit recovery. Using alternative names—such as "Structured Academic Support," "Jumpstart," and "Reconnection"—was relatively common across districts; one district reported having five different names at five different high schools. So while "credit recovery" might be a recognizable brand, not everything schools are actually doing to catch students up on course credit goes by that brand name.

Whatever districts might call their credit recovery systems, some common practices string them together. The overwhelming majority of responding districts reported using online education programs for credit recovery. Almost 60 percent of districts offer both online and in-person instruction or have a program that combines both, and an additional 37 percent exclusively use online programs. Less than

Figure 1. Credit Recovery Program Format

Program Name
- Credit Recovery: 74%
- District Specific: 26%

Program Format
- Online: 37%
- In Person: 5%
- Both: 58%

Time of Year Available
- Year-Round: 87%
- School Year Only: 9%
- Summer Only: 4%

Source: Author's calculations.

In Their Own Words: Implementing Credit Recovery

"[To participate in credit recovery], students and parents must sign the honor code. Teachers can see what's on students' screens. We want to make sure there's integrity involved."

"Since No Child Left Behind and [the push for] '100 percent graduation rate,' we are caught between seeing that students graduate or really learn the material!"

5 percent of districts reported not using online programs of any kind.

In addition, we found that across districts, credit recovery is available to students at almost any time. Eighty-seven percent of districts reported that they offer credit recovery year-round. This could mean that they offer different programs at different times or have open access to a single ongoing program, but some form of credit recovery is accessible during both the school year and the summer. Only 9 percent reported offering it during the school year alone. Just 4 percent offer it exclusively during the summer.

Taken together, these results show that how these districts and schools handle makeup courses has undergone a complete and rapid change. In the span of just one academic generation, the narrower framework of traditional summer school has been replaced by a system that is restricted to neither the summer nor the schoolroom. In the face of such a quick transformation, it is reasonable to wonder whether the policies have caught up to the new practices.

The results surrounding student and course eligibility requirements were mixed, but again they were consistent with the prevalence of expansive credit recovery programs (Figure 2). Just over 40 percent of responding districts offer credit recovery just for core courses required for graduation, as might be expected if credit recovery was narrowly targeted for graduation improvement. At the same time, well over half of districts offer credit recovery for courses that are not required. In that group, one in 10

districts offer credit recovery for all courses. Since not all courses have an exact online equivalent, this suggests that some districts do not merely offer credit recovery opportunities for certain courses to fulfill specific needs but have made credit recovery a policy that applies across the board and becomes a standard operating procedure.
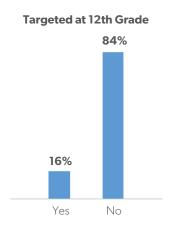
A significant majority of districts (84 percent) reported that their credit recovery programs are open to students across multiple grades, not just those at the tail end of high school trying to graduate on time. This figure suggests that most districts treat credit recovery as less about catching up toward the end of high school and more about keeping grades up and staying on track to graduate throughout high school.
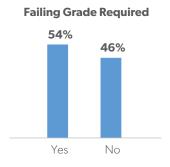
Interestingly, not all responding districts require that students first fail a course to enroll in credit recovery. In fact, the results were almost split evenly in half, with 54 percent requiring a failed grade to enroll and 46 percent having no such requirement. In this second group, not requiring a failed grade would allow students to not only regain credit for a course but also boost their grade. In a similar vein, half of responding districts allow students to enroll in credit recovery on a rolling basis, meaning that they could begin recovering credit after failing just a quarter or a semester, rather than waiting for their final grade at the end of the year (not pictured).
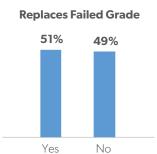
While these features may seem suspect, plausible arguments support them. Consider a student who starts off the year poorly—especially due to

Figure 2. Eligibility for Credit Recovery

Source: Author's calculations.

sickness or other reasons out of their control. Is it sensible that they should go through the rest of the year knowing that a severely damaged or failed grade awaits at the end?

Additionally, if a student falls behind on course content early and can quickly remediate his or her learning in areas that may be foundational for success toward the course end, a quality midcourse correction may be the most efficient and low-dose corrective for getting back on track. This could especially be true when the alternative is taking the full course again in an abbreviated credit recovery program. Arguably, allowing for enrollment on a rolling basis, and before a course is failed, could help credit recovery achieve its central goal of helping students avoid not only falling behind but also falling further behind.

Districts were also split in how they reported handling student grades after credit recovery courses. Just over half reported that the credit recovery grade replaced the original grade, and 49 percent reported that it did not. However, grades were treated differently in each group. In the first group, a handful of districts commented that they have a cap on that replaced grade, meaning that students cannot earn any higher than a certain grade (such as a C or a 74 percent), regardless of how well they perform in the credit recovery course. Other districts reported that while both grades appear on a student's transcript (sometimes marked with a "repeat" or "credit recovery" label), only the new grade is used to calculate GPA.
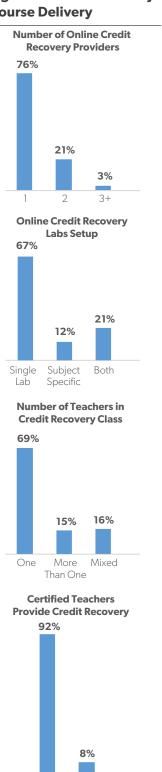
In the second group, some districts commented that the final grade

is calculated as an average of the failed and credit recovery grades, while others allowed students to earn credit but maintain the old grade. In some cases, these policies are not uniform. Although our instrument did not capture it systematically, one district reported that students can replace their grade if they take the credit recovery course in person, but they can only receive an average of the two grades if they take it online.

Since most school districts use online credit recovery, the question of how they administer those online programs naturally follows (Figure 3). Just over three-quarters of responding districts reported using a single provider, with Edgenuity and Apex Learning by far the most popular. (Both are among the few NCAA-approved systems, and some districts expressed that this motivated their decision to choose them, though all respondents were not qualified to discuss those motivations, and the data were not systematically collected.) The vast majority, almost 90 percent, of districts have students taking various credit recovery courses in one computer lab, and most districts reported that their labs are usually supervised by a single teacher.

Schools might have good reasons, such as staff shortages or schedule constraints, to deliver credit recovery programs this way. At the same time, that most of these classes are not subject specific and they tend to have only one faculty member (usually a certified teacher) in the classroom implies that many, if not all, students taking these courses do

Figure 3. Credit Recovery Course Delivery

Source: Author's calculations.

not have a subject-specific teacher to assist them. That kind of setup could create problems for student-athletes seeking approval from the NCAA, which requires credit recovery to include "ongoing and regular teacher-initiated interaction for the purposes of teaching, evaluating, and providing assistance throughout the duration of the course."[22]

This means that to get NCAA approval, schools with single-lab, one-teacher systems might need a separate program with the necessary standards for student-athletes. In fact, some districts indicated that this is precisely what they do, offering two options, only one of which is NCAA eligible. If credit recovery is not already at risk of placing students who are struggling the most on a lower track that gives them little support for academic progress, this practice certainly makes it so.

To get a better handle on how academically rigorous credit recovery courses may be, it is fitting to examine how districts let students progress and be evaluated in those courses (Figure 4). In our data collection, 61 percent of responding districts reported allowing students to test out of lessons in their online programs by passing "pretests." Almost 70 percent do not have seat-time requirements, meaning that students can complete the courses at their own pace.
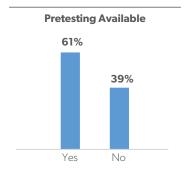
Again, it is worth considering the reasonable arguments for each factor, which may seem dubious at first look. For those who might write off these approaches, recall the last time you clicked through a basic online email safety or human resource training

course for work—or were unable to skip through the long hours of traffic videos and quizzes on a DMV online course. A lack of flexibility in completing the course might discourage students (especially those who have already mastered most of the material) from taking credit recovery, giving districts good reason to adopt these policies. At the same time, both policies open the door for shortcuts and abuse that can let students sidestep rather than meet expectations. In addition, they rub up against the NCAA requirement to "have a defined time period for completion,"[23] again pushing schools to tighten their own credit recovery requirements or create a second program.
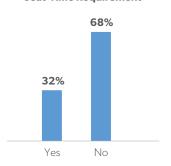
Most responding districts' credit recovery programs are computer graded at least in part, with almost 60 percent involving no teacher grading at all. Of course, if one goal of credit recovery is efficiency and flexibility, it is a reasonable strategy to leverage technology as much as possible to help students pass the course and avoid burdening teachers with additional grading.

Finally, the vast majority (83 percent) of responding districts do not require students to take a separate, school-administered exam in addition to the test embedded in the online course. If a district has invested in an online course, it is reasonable to expect that it trusts the rigor and assessment mechanism of that course or that it has some supplemental strategy to review student performance. Moreover, external assessments could create unnecessary work for students when the online assessments are
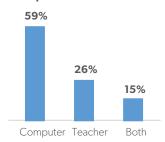
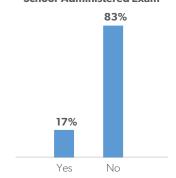**Figure 4. Credit Recovery Course Progression and Assessment**

Source: Author's calculations.

truly rigorous. However, the lack of a separate school-based exam means that online assessments are the last measure of rigor in these courses. That last measure may be of dubious quality. Especially when schools are offering a broad array of courses for credit recovery, due diligence on each, one's assessments—over and above checking the providers content—is a resource-intensive task that should involve schools' instructional staff. That due diligence may often get short shrift, especially when those entrusted with running credit recovery have every incentive to set the bar low to graduate more students.

The responses to each individual survey question provide valuable information on credit recovery policies, but those responses also varied substantially. To get a more holistic view on the expansiveness and flexibility in these credit recovery programs, we counted how many districts had established policies that might circumscribe their programs' flexibility. We summed eight policy dimensions from our survey, asking whether district programs included the following: in-person instruction, specified periods of availability, a specified seat-time requirement, teacher grading, no pretesting out of modules, an external exam, subject-specific classes, and multiple teacher oversight. Twenty percent of the districts surveyed reported they had none of these dimensions, and about half (another 31 percent) reported having no more than one. Three-quarters reported no more than two of these attributes. These totals suggest that credit recovery programs in most of these districts have relatively few constraints and are relatively permissive on multiple dimensions at the same time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to shed light on school district policies that can give us a clearer sense of how schools handle credit recovery, particularly when they are offering it frequently. We looked at districts with high participation rates since they should have well-articulated policies and they affect an outsized portion of students using credit recovery. The responses from a representative sample of 168 public school districts revealed various policies and practices that, on the whole, leaned toward expansive and unregulated instructional programs.

Amid the responses, a handful of key trends stood out. The majority of responding districts offer credit recovery online and year-round, and few have students taking courses in subject-specific labs. Hefty portions do not require failing grades to participate and often replace the original grade, and most allow students to complete credit recovery courses at their own pace.

In this discussion, it is first essential to give credit recovery its due: Without a doubt, this is some of the hardest work in high school education. Credit recovery attempts to get students who have already fallen behind to reach high standards and to get back on track for graduation. Working with students who are struggling the most or are the least engaged and pushing them to meet graduation requirements is worth doing and is no small task. Frequently, that work is made more difficult because districts attempt to do it under tight time constraints and usually at low cost. That difficulty and worthiness of this task is important

---

In Their Own Words: Evolving Credit Recovery Programs

"We have taken steps to increase the integrity of the programs by restricting access to other browsers while students are taking courses."

"Probably five years ago, credit recovery [allowed] pretesting out. Our teachers complained, so we went to the union and changed [that policy]. They suspected students were failing on purpose, so they revamped it."

"We'll see how rigorous it is. We changed programs two years ago; it changes frequently."

to recognize, as is the possibility that these programs are not achieving these goals.

Credit recovery programs need flexibility to make this work possible, but as numerous commentators have observed, that flexibility also introduces moral hazards. As Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Chester Finn Jr. aptly put it in *Education Next,* "What good does it really do society—or the young person himself—when the education system declares that he has 'recovered' enough 'credit' to deserve a credential that is described as evidence of college/career readiness when in the real world none of that is true?"[24] Or as investigative journalist Zoe Kirsch concludes in *Slate*, "Despite the recent baby steps in the direction of accountability over credit recovery, officials have a long way to go toward ensuring that the growing number of diplomas granted in communities across the country actually mean something."[25]

These moral hazards stem from two competing incentives districts face: raising graduation rates and maintaining academic standards and rigor. What can tip the scale toward hazard is the fact that the first is easily measurable, while the second is not—and that, truth be told, the easiest way to get more kids to graduate is to lower standards. This is precisely why we need clear-eyed policies from the district level that balance both the productivity and quality of credit recovery.

Taken individually, flexible credit recovery policies can be justified. Test-out options allow students who have mastered certain lessons to complete their credits more efficiently. No seat-time requirements accommodate students who learn at various paces. Online grading can be high quality and avoid giving teachers extra work. Doing without an independent assessment can prevent duplicative work.

Taken together, however, these policies offer little assurance that serious attention is given to quality and rigor. When a district sets up a credit recovery program that lets students skip through lessons, do it as quickly as they want, avoid having a teacher examine their work, *and* not worry about a final test outside the online program, the reasons for worry compound. Our summation of the eight policy dimensions surrounding program flexibility imply that many districts offer many of these options. By doing so, they run the risk of reproducing cases such as the student who passed Algebra I in one minute and having them pass unnoticed.

I do not presume to offer a prescription that districts should follow to do credit recovery well—nor do I assume a single prescription exists. However, districts should have a clear answer to the question, "What policies has your district established to ensure rigor in their credit recovery programs?" Based on the conversations my team had with district officials, it is clear that in many districts, their answer is unacceptably indifferent to the quality of instruction. When asked whether teachers were satisfied with their district's credit recovery programs, one respondent simply sighed. Another gave a resounding *no*, saying, "It's too easy for students . . . they can finish a semester in about two weeks." A third dismissed the question: "I don't ask that question [to teachers] because I don't care." None of these answers will suffice.

There is no one-size-fits-all policy on credit recovery because different approaches have trade-offs. For instance, having credit recovery participants reach a minimum score on an independent exam that is aligned to the specific course content is a clear way to uphold academic standards and align expectations across credit recovery and standard courses, but developing those exams, especially for a wide range of courses, will require substantial effort and may hurt students who struggle.

Another approach could make teachers responsible for reviewing students' credit recovery work for the classes they teach and signing off that they have demonstrated proficiency; relying on regular classroom teachers could align expectations across credit recovery and standard classes but also would add work to teachers' already full plates and hinge on their commitment to high expectations. Both policy approaches, and others, are plausible means to ensure rigor, and districts should consider the trade-offs in each and commit to a plan they can follow through on.

This report has one significant limitation worth pointing out, which is that only school districts with high credit recovery participation rates were surveyed. This approach means that respondents have

good reason to have established policies, but generalizing from them risks assuming that districts with lower rates of credit recovery participation also tend to have expansive policies when this is not necessarily the case. That causality could run the opposite direction, in which districts made it into our sample because of their high participation that flowed from expansive policies.

While the data in this report convey policies of major credit recovery systems that affect a large portion of credit recovery participants, they may not reflect credit recovery writ large. Nonetheless, these high-participation districts underscore the importance of protecting rigor in credit recovery, and lower-participation districts can benefit from grappling with these questions. Future research should examine in greater depth the degree to which the policy trends from this sample apply to others.

Why does all this matter? Ultimately, when districts fail to create policies that govern credit recovery and police quality, students bear the brunt. Quick and easy programs that simply obtain students a piece of paper might raise graduation rates, but as Finn and Kirsch observed, a meaningless diploma only hurts the students it is meant to help.

This is not to say that credit recovery should not be done—far from it. It is valid, hard work that can help many struggling students succeed, and districts should continue to pursue it. But by that same token, the choices districts make about policies that dictate how this work is done can and, in many anecdotes, have worked against that central pursuit. Neither districts, schools, nor the public should be satisfied until these programs are guarded by policies that not only provide credit recovery but also do it well.

About the Author

Nat Malkus is a resident scholar and the deputy director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, where he specializes in empirical research through the use of quantitative data to analyze K–12 schooling.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Table 1. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographic Characteristics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2015–16," October 25, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2015-16.asp.

2. The US Department of Education's National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate shows significantly higher numbers: 89 percent of US high schools reported offering a credit recovery program, and school principals estimated that an average of 15 percent of high school students participated. However, because principals' responses were recorded on a 100-point online slider, which is poorly suited to gauging small percentages, the participation rate estimates are likely overstated. See US Department of Education, "National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate," https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports-high-school.html. I rely instead on the descriptive statistics from the Civil Rights Data Collection in this report and my previous report due to its more conservative estimates, size, currency, and administrative (rather than survey) data.

3. David Loewenberg, "A Digital Path to a Diploma," *Education Next* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2020), https://www.educationnext.org/digital-path-to-diploma-online-credit-recovery-classes/.

4. Susan Edelman, Lorena Mongelli, and Bruce Golding, "'Fail Me' School's Kids Can Take Year's Worth of Classes in 6 Weeks," *New York Post*, August 5, 2015, https://nypost.com/2015/08/05/fail-me-schools-kids-can-take-years-worth-of-classes-in-6-weeks/; Susan Edelman, "School Saves 150 Failing Students with Quickie Online Courses," *New York Post*, July 19, 2015, https://nypost.com/2015/07/19/school-saves-150-failing-students-with-quickie-online-courses/; and Dedrick Russell, "CMS Launches Investigation into Credit Recovery Center Allegations," WBTV.com, August 2, 2017, https://www.wbtv.com/story/36037677/cms-launches-investigation-into-credit-recovery-center-allegations/.

5. Zoe Kirsch, "The New Diploma Mills," *Slate*, May 23, 2017, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/05/u-s-high-schools-may-be-over-relying-on-online-credit-recovery-to-boost-their-graduation-rates.html; and Susan Edelman and Bruce Golding, "DOE Official Was Informed of Effort to Graduate Failing Students," *New York Post*, August 10, 2015, https://nypost.com/2015/08/10/doe-official-was-informed-of-effort-to-graduate-failing-students/.

6. Alvarez & Marsal, "Final Report District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation," Office of the State Superintendent of Education, January 26, 2018, https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/release_content/attachments/Report%20on%20DCPS%20Graduation%20and%20Attendance%20Outcomes%20-%20Alvarez%26Marsal.pdf.

7. Loewenberg, "A Digital Path to a Diploma."

8. Nat Malkus, "Second Chance or Second Track? Credit Recovery Participation in US High Schools," American Enterprise Institute, September 17, 2018, http://www.aei.org/spotlight/second-chance-or-second-track-credit-recovery-participation-in-us-high-schools/.

9. Adam Tyner and Nicholas Munyan-Penney, "Gotta Give 'Em Credit: State and District Variation in Credit Recovery Participation Rates," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, November 29, 2018, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/gotta-give-em-credit.

10. Samantha L. Viano, "Panel Paper: An Evaluation of Credit Recovery as an Intervention for Students Who Fail Courses," Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, November 10, 2018, https://appam.confex.com/appam/2018/webprogram/Paper26158.html. This is a conference paper and still under review, but we include it here given its insights and the relative dearth of research on this topic.

11. Carolyn J. Heinrich et al., "A Look Inside Online Education Settings in High School: Promise and Pitfalls for Improving Educational Opportunities and Outcomes," *American Educational Research Journal*, March 27, 2019, https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-my/wp-content/uploads/sites/2135/2016/06/14135008/HS-online-course-taking_forthcoming-AERJ1.pdf.

12. Jessica B. Heppen et al., "The Struggle to Pass Algebra: Online vs. Face-to-Face Credit Recovery for at-Risk Urban Students," *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 10, no. 2 (2017), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19345747.2016.1168500.

13. Jessica B. Heppen et al., "Comparing the Effectiveness of Online and Face-to-Face Credit Recovery in Algebra I: The Back on

Track Study: Research Brief 1 of 6," American Institutes for Research, April 8, 2016, https://www.air.org/resource/comparing-effectiveness-online-and-face-face-credit-recovery-algebra-i.

14. Jessica B. Heppen et al., "Course Progression for Students Who Fail Algebra I in Ninth Grade: The Back on Track Study: Research Brief 6 of 6," American Institutes for Research, June 30, 2017, https://www.air.org/resource/course-progression-students-who-fail-algebra-i-ninth-grade.

15. John Hughes, Chengfu Zhou, and Yaacov Petscher, "Comparing Success Rates for General and Credit Recovery Courses Online and Face to Face: Results for Florida High School Courses," US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, September 2015, https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2015095.pdf.

16. National Collegiate Athletic Association, "How We Support College Athletes," http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/ncaa-101/how-we-support-college-athletes.

17. National Collegiate Athletic Association, "NCAA Eligibility Center," https://web3.ncaa.org/ecwr3/.

18. Nicholas Sproull, "NCAA and Credit Recovery," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December 11, 2018, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/ncaa-and-credit-recovery.

19. National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Nontraditional Courses," http://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/future/nontraditional-courses.

20. For these counts of students and credit recovery participation, we excluded schools with fewer than 50 students or fewer than 25 students in the 12th grade, all schools identified as virtual schools, Bureau of Indian Education schools, schools in Puerto Rico, alternative schools, or juvenile justice facilities in 2015–16 according to either the Civil Rights Data Collection or National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

21. See Malkus, "Second Chance or Second Track?"; and Sproull, "NCAA and Credit Recovery."

22. National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Nontraditional Courses."

23. National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Nontraditional Courses."

24. Chester E. Finn Jr., "The Credit-Recovery Scam," *Education Next*, July 7, 2012, https://www.educationnext.org/the-credit-recovery-scam/.

25. Zoe Kirsch, "Regulation of Credit Recovery Courses Slowly Gains Steam," *Slate*, September 29, 2017, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/09/local-officials-are-starting-to-investigate-credit-recovery-courses.html.