

Stated Briefly

# Online course use in New York high schools: Results from a survey in the Greater Capital Region



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A survey revealed that 59 percent of respondent high schools in the New York Greater Capital Region enrolled students in online courses in the 2012/13 school year. Schools offered online courses primarily to provide students with opportunities for credit recovery. School officials expressed concern about course quality and academic integrity.

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## **Why this study?**

Prior to 2010 the New York State Education Department had not established state policies regulating schools' use of online courses for their students. In 2010 the Board of Regents approved changes in state regulations to allow students to participate in online learning under two circumstances: to make up incomplete or failed courses or to earn credit for elective courses through independent study. In 2011 the board approved an additional state regulation that allows students to earn any type of course credit by enrolling in and successfully completing an online course.

This brief is a companion document to the longer report: Clements, M., Pazzaglia, A. M., & Zweig, J. (2015). *Online course use in New York high schools: Results of a survey in the Greater Capital Region*. (REL 2015–075). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. That report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

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## **Box 1. Research questions**

The comprehensive report addresses the following research questions:

- How did the Capital Area School Development Association high schools use online courses to supplement the face-to-face courses that students took during the 2012/13 school year?
  - Why did these high schools use online courses for their students?
  - What challenges did these high schools encounter in their use of online courses?
  - For surveyed high schools that did not use online courses, what factors influenced their decision not to do so?
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The study on which this brief and its longer companion report (Clements, Pazzaglia, & Zweig, 2015) are based had two goals: to create a survey tool for collecting information on how and why schools in New York are using online learning and on factors that hinder that use, and to provide information on how and why high schools in the New York Greater Capital Region are using online courses for their students. The study addressed four research questions (box 1). This brief focuses on a subset of the findings and their implications for research and policy.

The study was a collaboration between the Northeast Rural Districts Research Alliance at the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast & Islands and the Capital Area School Development Association (CASDA), an organization with a long history of supporting member schools in eastern New York State, the majority of which are in rural areas. REL Northeast & Islands and CASDA collaborated to adapt an existing survey designed to capture information about how and why schools use online courses, as well as about the challenges they encounter in doing so.<sup>1</sup> The study team established the content validity of the survey items through a review of the literature, expert review and feedback, and interviews with educators. The team used this information, along with additional feedback from CASDA, to finalize the survey.

CASDA distributed the survey to the 99 public high schools it serves, asking them to forward the survey to the staff member who was the most familiar with the school's online learning program. CASDA received responses from 59 schools (60 percent). Fifty-one percent of the respondent schools were in rural areas, 15 percent in towns, and 34 percent in city or suburban areas. Eighty-eight percent of the respondent schools were eligible for Title I subsidies,<sup>2</sup> and an average of 88 percent of students in the respondent schools were White. Although a statistical analysis found that the demographic characteristics of the respondent schools were not significantly different from those of the nonrespondent schools,<sup>3</sup> it is possible that the results are not representative of all CASDA high schools.

### **What the study found**

A survey of New York State public high schools supported by CASDA found that 59 percent of the 59 respondent schools used online courses for their students during the 2012/13 school year, primarily to provide students with credit-recovery courses. Both schools that did and those that did not enroll students in online courses reported concerns about the educational experiences of students taking online courses. For example, schools expressed concerns about online course quality, academic integrity, and the lack of face-to-face interaction as challenges in implementing online courses or reasons for not using them.

**The majority of respondent high schools enrolled students in online courses but did so for a small percentage of their students**

Of the 59 high schools that responded to the survey, 35 (59 percent) reported that they enrolled students in online courses during the 2012/13 school year. In these schools, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course represented an average of 6 percent of a school’s student population in grades 9–12.

**Respondent high schools used online courses most often for credit recovery**

Seventy-seven percent of schools that enrolled students in online courses reported that at least one student had taken an online course to recover credit for an incomplete or failed course. Further, 82 percent of schools that enrolled students in online courses reported that providing opportunities for students to recover course credits was a “very important” reason for using online courses. Less than half of schools enrolling students in online courses reported using these courses for other academic objectives, such as elective or Advanced Placement courses.

**Among respondent high schools that enrolled students in online courses, the most prominent challenges reported were related to the educational experiences offered by online courses**

The survey asked CASDA high schools that enrolled students in online courses about the challenges they encountered in doing so. The responses indicated that a majority of schools were concerned about the educational experiences offered by online courses. Among high schools that enrolled students in online courses, over half reported at least “a little” concern regarding course quality (71 percent), the academic integrity of online learning (60 percent), and the lack of face-to-face interaction between students and teachers (58 percent; figure 1).

**Figure 1. Concerns about students’ academic experiences in online courses were most prominent among the challenges respondent high schools faced in providing online learning, 2012/13**



**Note:** The figure displays the responses of the 28 high schools that reported using online courses to the question, “In school year 2012/13, to what extent did your school encounter the following challenges related to your online course use?” Seven schools that reported using online courses did not complete this question.

**Source:** Authors’ analysis based on Capital Area School Development Association survey data for 2012/13.

## **A majority of respondent high schools that did not enroll students in online courses cited similar concerns about educational experiences as reasons for not using them**

Of respondents that did not use online courses, 71 percent reported at least “a little” concern about the lack of face-to-face interaction between students and online teachers, 64 percent reported concerns about the quality of online courses, and 63 percent reported concerns about the academic integrity of online courses. While most schools reported only a little concern about these issues, it is notable that educational concerns were prevalent for both schools that used online courses and those that did not.

### **Implications of the study findings for research and policy**

Research on how schools implement online credit recovery courses and the outcomes of students in those courses could build on the findings of this study. Furthermore, the frequently cited concerns about the educational experiences of students in online courses suggest that additional research is needed on effective online teaching practices and strategies for supporting students in online courses.

CASDA high schools’ use of online learning to provide credit recovery opportunities for students is consistent with national trends. Credit recovery was the most commonly cited academic objective of online courses in a nationally representative survey of U.S. school districts and in a recent survey of schools in Iowa and Wisconsin (Clements, Stafford, Pazzaglia, & Jacobs, 2015; Queen & Lewis, 2011). While the CASDA survey did not ask about completion rates of online credit recovery courses, other research suggests that they may be particularly low (Ferdig, 2010) and that students taking online credit recovery courses may need additional support to complete them successfully (Jones, 2009; National High School Center, 2011).

These factors, combined with respondents’ concerns about students’ educational experiences in online courses, suggest the need for additional information about how CASDA high schools use online courses for credit recovery. In the absence of a large body of rigorous research on the effectiveness of online learning for credit recovery to guide their decisionmaking, districts and schools may want to use their own data to answer the following questions:

- What are the short-term academic outcomes of students in online credit-recovery courses? For example, what percentage of students successfully complete these courses?
- What are the longer term academic outcomes of students in online credit-recovery courses? For example, do these students go on to enroll in and successfully complete the next course in the relevant course sequence?
- How are schools implementing online learning to provide students with credit-recovery opportunities? For example, do the online courses employ instructional approaches associated with student success (Bakia et al., 2013)? Are students receiving the kinds of support associated with academic success for this population (Rumberger, 2011; National High School Center, 2011)?

## **Notes**

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1. The original survey was developed by the study team in collaboration with the Virtual Education Research Alliance at Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest (Clements et al., 2015). It includes items drawn and adapted from the following: a survey developed by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and administered to a nationally representative sample of school districts (Queen & Lewis, 2011); a survey that was the data source for a report on online and blended course use in the United States (Picciano & Seaman, 2009); and the California eLearning Census (California Learning Resource Network, 2012).
2. Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended, provides financial assistance to local education agencies and schools with a high number or high percentage of students from low-income households to help ensure that all students meet challenging state academic standards.
3. The study team compared the schools that did respond to the survey with those that did not respond in terms of school locale (rural, nonrural), total enrollment, percentage of students in each race/ethnicity category (Black, Hispanic, Asian, White, and other, where "other" included American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander, and two or more races), pupil–teacher ratio, and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

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