TEACHER BRIEF

Online courses for credit recovery in high schools: Effectiveness and promising practices

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In an era when leaving school without a diploma bears enormous costs, more and more high schools are offering students the opportunity to retake previously failed courses online—an approach known as "online credit recovery." These online courses are still new enough that their structures have not been fully developed in many schools, and their purpose and mechanisms are not well understood by many school personnel. Meanwhile, the teachers responsible for teaching and administering credit recovery classes are often in early phases of learning how to do so effectively themselves.

This brief is the second in a series highlighting promising practices for teachers who lead online credit recovery courses.[1] The practices are drawn from a study of 12 Massachusetts high schools that developed online credit recovery programs as part of the MassGrad initiative. A previous brief focused on strategies for motivating and managing students in an online environment. Here, we focus on strategies teachers can use to create a productive learning environment, and the variety of roles credit recovery teachers play within and beyond the classroom.

STUDY DETAILS

The study that informs this brief examined 12 Massachusetts high schools with high dropout rates that had developed online credit recovery programs between 2011 and 2015, asking teachers, administrators, and students to report on practices that showed the greatest promise. Most of the study schools provided online classes in a school or community-based setting, where one or two teachers supervised up to 20 students across multiple academic disciplines and grade levels. Students progressed at their own pace, so typically no two students were engaged in the same activity at the same time. In all but one of the schools, courses were taught entirely or almost entirely online, with minimal teacher-led components.

[1] A link to the first brief is provided in the "Additional Resources" section below.

CREATING A PRODUCTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

An online credit recovery classroom is quite different from a traditional classroom, in that students largely work independently. Students may join or leave the classroom at different times in the school year, stay for multiple class periods, or take just one period of credit recovery in addition to a more traditional course load. Some students, including English language learners and those with special learning needs, may work more closely with the teacher, but for the most part, students' progress depends on brief supports from the teacher and minimal interactions with peers. Once students have logged in, there is no opportunity for the teacher to address the whole group without disrupting students' focus.

Teachers use many strategies to create a positive, productive environment within this context. Our first teacher brief discussed several of these strategies, including the use of course software to monitor student work, providing direct support to encourage and motivate individuals, and using check ins and progress indicators to support students' goal setting, time management, and self-regulation. Here, we introduce several more strategies for keeping class time productive.

✔ Reducing distractions.

Students appeared to make better progress in classrooms with fewer distractions, and this factor was influenced by both teacher practices and school policies. A central issue is the use of headphones, which students need to listen to the online lectures. Teachers may also allow (or even encourage) students to listen to music on headphones in order to maintain focus, block out distractions, and experience fewer temptations to turn to classmates for social stimulation. In study schools, these practices positively influenced many students' course progress and reduced behavior problems. However, some students were distracted by the music (for example, watching the accompanying YouTube videos) or played music loudly enough to distract others. The bandwidth required for music streaming slowed down computer operations in some schools, and students who listened to music from their cell phones were sometimes distracted by text messages. While most study schools allowed students to listen to music, two schools rescinded this option after concluding that it caused too many distractions and power struggles between teachers and students.

Another source of distraction is talking. In study classrooms, some students spoke too loudly to each other or to the teacher. In a few classrooms, the teacher was the loudest person in an otherwise fairly quiet room, speaking at full volume even when sitting next to a student, or speaking across the room to a student or colleague for an extended period. These interactions were visibly distracting to students, suggesting that teachers should assess the impact of students' and their own speaking volume and set norms accordingly.

✔ Positioning computers strategically.

To help students focus, teachers need to be able to monitor students' computer screens, easily move into position for one-to-one support, and reduce student-to-student distractions. The classroom layout that appears to be most effective in supporting all three goals is arranging computers around the periphery of the room, with students' desks facing the walls and the teacher's desk facing into the middle. One study site with this arrangement also installed carrels. Another effective arrangement lined up computers in multiple rows facing in the same direction, enabling the teacher to see all screens from the back of the classroom. Some teachers used screen-monitoring software to view all student screens on their own computer.

A less effective arrangement placed computers in two long rows facing each other, which meant teachers could never see more than half of the screens at once and students had constant opportunities for peer eye contact. Finally, in one site, students took laptops from a cart, spread out across multiple rooms, and were able to position themselves so their screen was not visible to the teacher. That arrangement severely limited teacher monitoring.

While the monitoring strategies described here may seem at odds with developing students' capacity for self-regulation, it's worth noting that multiple students were frank about their need for teacher support to maintain focus, expressing that "too much freedom is a bad thing."

✔ Managing student behavior.

In the study schools, some teachers seemed to foster an optimal balance of authority, support, and flexibility, whereas a few teachers either ignored students' poor task management or tolerated (and even contributed to) a chaotic environment. Most teachers actively moved around the room, supporting students and monitoring their activities, but others remained stationary at their computer for most of the period while students sent text messages, surfed the Internet, or engaged in other quiet activities that did not advance their coursework.

In short, a quiet room does not guarantee that students are working, and teachers play a vital role in enhancing the quality of students' learning experiences. Online credit recovery teachers should assess their own actions and abilities in this area, and seek support if they are unable to manage productive student behavior.

MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

Overseeing computing infrastructure is not typically the domain of classroom teachers, but online credit recovery teachers often take on an expanded role in this area. This is not surprising in a context where students are dependent on computers to complete coursework, and hardware or software problems can slow their progress.

✔ Addressing hardware and software challenges.

In one study school, the courseware worked best with one Internet browser, but the school only permitted installation of a different browser. To get around this obstacle, students began every period by downloading the preferred browser, which was then automatically deleted when they logged out. At another school, outdated computers did not work well with the courseware, resulting in frequent crashes that forced students to redo modules or assessments. These problems wasted time and caused frustration and distraction. In both cases, the teacher's advocacy with administrators and information technology personnel led to solutions that increased student productivity.

✔ Informing courseware selection.

Observant teachers are well positioned to inform choices about new courseware and upgrades. Teachers became experts on the strengths and weaknesses of the courseware by observing students' work, conferring with students, noting their own experience with pedagogical and administrative features, reading vendor materials that offer tips and announce new features, and attending professional development events offered by vendors. This level of familiarity and knowledge is unique to teachers who have daily, first-hand interactions with students and courseware.

Several schools changed courseware vendors during the MassGrad initiative, decisions typically related to both cost and functionality. Some teachers approached administrators to share their perspectives about challenges and solutions, while other teachers provided information in response to requests from administrators. Two schools switched vendors in part due to the teachers' observations about the limitations of the original courseware: assessments required mostly low-level responses that could be found through Internet searches; students could skip lectures, guess at multiple-choice answers, and retake assessments repeatedly; and the tutorials were too text based, a problem for students with reading challenges. The new courseware reduced these problems. There was no perfect courseware, however; each platform had a unique combination of strengths and challenges that influenced the implementation of online courses at each school.

EXPANDED ROLES FOR ONLINE CREDIT RECOVERY TEACHERS

Key aspects of credit recovery program development often fall to the teachers, with highly motivated teachers frequently taking on unaccustomed responsibilities beyond the classroom—as advocates, recruiters, course developers, liaisons, and networkers.

✔ Teacher as program advocate.

Because online credit recovery courses are relatively new in many schools, teachers frequently take on the role of informing colleagues and advocating for the courses' value. Early in the MassGrad study, online credit recovery teachers at several schools reported that many staff believed online courses were less rigorous than traditional courses, rewarded poor work habits in traditional courses, and reduced students' motivation to pass traditional courses. While online credit recovery teachers acknowledged that these negative incentives may indeed influence some students, they also noted that students had been failing courses since long before the advent of online courses, and that offering online credit recovery is consistent with their schools' emphasis on providing alternative routes to a diploma.

Over the course of the study, online credit recovery teachers at many schools noted a shift toward greater acceptance and appreciation of online courses among their colleagues. The teachers attributed this in part to colleagues' increased familiarity with the courses, having spent time in an online credit recovery classroom, discussing the courses with students, and working with an online credit recovery teacher to structure courses and supports for students. By facilitating these touchpoints, online credit recovery teachers became essential advocates for the program.

Such efforts were not universally successful, however. At one school, several factors made implementing online courses very challenging and led the school to return to a more traditional teacher-led credit recovery approach. These factors included lack of teacher support for online courses, serious challenges with staff turnover and hardware availability, and limited student presence in the school building to receive teacher supervision.

✔ Teacher as student recruiter.

Online credit recovery teachers also serve as advocates for the program with students who are not enrolled in online courses. Two study schools reported that many students did not realize that online courses might enable them to graduate with fewer additional class hours than if they retook the same courses in a traditional classroom. This was particularly true for students who earned high scores on the online pre-tests, thereby demonstrating that they had learned much of the material when they took

the course in a traditional classroom format. At one school, enrollment increased after credit recovery teachers held a meeting with under-credited seniors to educate them about online courses. Online credit recovery teachers at several schools also enlisted current students to recruit friends who needed to recover credits.

✔ Teacher as problem-solver.

The credit recovery teacher is often the first adult to notice problems with online courses and to advocate with administrators for changes. One district in the study only permitted students to enroll in one online course at a time. The credit recovery teacher recognized that students were bored and wanted more variety, and she convinced administrators to allow students to take up to two courses at a time.

Teachers frequently engage in finding solutions to other aspects of program development as well, seeking administrative supports that reinforce classroom expectations, ensuring sufficient staffing, and pursuing opportunities for their own professional development.

✔ Teacher as course developer.

The courseware provided to MassGrad schools was highly customizable. The vendors offered extensive course content, typically exceeding local curriculum requirements, with the final course content determined by some combination of district and school personnel, curriculum coordinators, and classroom teachers. Online credit recovery teachers often provided feedback and consultation in this process.

Teachers frequently notified curriculum coordinators and classroom teachers when particular modules or activities were flawed, poorly structured, or could not be successfully completed by even the most diligent students. Such activities were then typically replaced with alternatives. Some teachers also reported when courses had too many activities on the same topic and were, therefore, taking too long to complete after students had already demonstrated mastery. Finally, some curriculum coordinators who were developing new courses consulted with online credit recovery teachers to determine which of the available activities would be most effective.

Many course development decisions were less formal. Teachers often made on-the-spot decisions about course modifications when they identified problems like those described above or realized that the course content was not appropriate in some way. Even when they lacked content knowledge relevant to a particular course, their extensive experience with students using the courseware enabled them to provide insights about which activities would be most successful.

✔ Teacher as academic advisor and liaison.

Online credit recovery teachers are routinely called upon to stretch beyond their areas of licensure and expertise to support students. Most of the online credit recovery teachers in MassGrad schools were certified in one or more academic disciplines or special education. They also received support from paraprofessionals. However, they supervised students who were taking courses in a wide range of academic disciplines. Over time, teachers expanded their knowledge in order to support students more effectively, often completing parts of courses themselves, watching tutorials with students, reviewing textbooks and websites, and consulting with colleagues.

Online credit recovery teachers sometimes sent students to see teachers with relevant expertise during after-school office hours, or asked those same colleagues to come to the credit recovery classroom during planning periods. One credit recovery teacher knew that a science teacher was on hall duty right outside the credit recovery classroom, and the two teachers swapped roles for part of the period so students could have more skilled supervision for their online science courses.

Because such requests relied on serendipity and the colleagues' generosity, they required an online credit recovery teacher who was well networked within the school, had strong interpersonal skills, and was willing to make the extra effort and expend the required social capital. Harnessing school resources in this way is typically an administrative duty, but administrators in several schools did not provide that support. Some administrators did make more formal arrangements, recruiting teachers from different academic disciplines to support credit recovery students after-school, or scheduling a group of students to take online mathematics courses with supervision from a mathematics teacher. One school paid teachers a stipend to staff the credit recovery classroom during their planning periods. Even with such arrangements, however, some students were left without expert supervision, and credit recovery teachers typically took on the responsibility of trying to fill any gaps.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

An earlier brief about online courses for credit recovery based on the MassGrad study of schools engaged in online credit recovery is available at: http://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/student-centered-learning/online-courses-for-credit-recovery-promising-pract.

The final report, which is targeted to an audience of educators, administrators, policy makers, and the public, will be available on the Nellie Mae Education Foundation website as well. The following websites contain resources addressing the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate online, blended, and competency-based learning programs.

International Association for K–12 Online Learning – http://www.inacol.org/

Keeping Pace with Digital Learning – http://www.kpk12.com/

Nellie Mae Education Foundation – http://www.nmefoundation.org/

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