



# Raising the Bar

The promise and pitfalls of online credit recovery | *Terrence Falk*

**S**ummer school. The two most dreaded words high schoolers hear come June when they find out they aren't passing core classes. Summer school has meant long mornings in humid classrooms with the sweat dripping down onto the pages of textbooks which never meant much in the first place, answering the same questions at the end of each chapter, and mixing well-understood concepts with confusing material presented in the same, encrypted manner.

Now enter the new world of online credit recovery where students can log onto a computer program, race through the sections they clearly have mastered and focus only in the areas where they struggle. Each program is tailored to each individual student's needs. They can reread materials and retake online tests until they master the material.

Online credit recovery courses have exploded across the nation. Estimates are that over 75 percent of U.S. high schools use some type of online credit recovery.

Here in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative provides online and blended learning. The collaborative consists of two organizations — the Wisconsin Virtual School and the Wisconsin eSchool Network.

Dawn Nordine, Executive Director of Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS), estimates that some 230 Wisconsin school districts and about 300 individual schools use WVS for credit recovery and other online learning services. Other school districts purchase services directly from online providers. Few Wisconsin

districts have not jumped into the digital learning pool.

As a result, graduation rates have soared both nationally and here in Wisconsin. A 10 percent jump in graduation rates after turning to online credit recovery has not been uncommon. Something to cheer about?

### ■ Red Flags

Not so fast. There have been several prominent examples where online credit recovery courses have fallen short.

In December 2015, only half of the seniors in the Los Angeles school system were on track to graduate that spring in part because the school system had instituted more rigorous standards for graduation. The school district instituted an extensive use of online credit recovery courses. Graduation rates jumped to 75 percent, but board president, Steve Zimmer, questioned whether students were really learning anything or just jumping through the online hoops. The University of California system began

questioning whether they should even accept online credit recovery grades. This was not the first time the value of online credit recovery had been questioned. The NCAA had already disqualified most online credit recovery courses for potential college freshmen.

It's not just Los Angeles. Cities across the country are questioning online credit recovery all the way to New York and Milwaukee. Small town and rural school districts are discovering some of the same problems.

To the larger issue, full-time cyber or virtual schools appear to be missing the mark nationally. Last year, Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that virtual schools where students have little physical interaction with teachers have, in general, an "overwhelming negative impact" on a students' education. The gains from one year of online mathematics were "literally as though the student did not go to school for the entire year," said CREDO director Macke

Raymond. But while the number of students in these online schools still remains small, online credit recovery reaches into every corner of the state and so do the problems.

### ■ How Do We Fix it?

In Los Angeles, the bar was set too low. To pass online tests, students only had to correctly answer 60 percent of test questions. In addition, students could bypass certain sections again answering only 60 percent of a mere 10 questions and did not have to write the essay questions. Students raced through the content in order to see if they could guess their way through the multiple choice tests at the end, often choosing to take several versions of the final tests rather than learn the material.

Carolyn Heinrich, now at Vanderbilt and formerly of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, worked with others to look at how Milwaukee was using its online credit recovery at the urging of the school district. In Milwaukee, they found that MPS was

## Online Credit Recovery for Student Athletes? *Be Careful!*



If a high school student wants to go on and participate in college athletics, most online credit recovery courses will not be accepted.

Jessica Kumke is Assistant Athletic Director for Compliance at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and makes this observation:

"One of the biggest problems we usually see with credit recovery is if it is completely online, self-paced, with no instructor really for the course. Those type of credit recovery classes are not going to be counted by the NCAA. It has to be teacher-based instruction, regular and ongoing instruction between teacher and the student."

Dave Anderson, Executive Director of the WIAA, says that his organization "...does not speak on behalf or for

the NCAA," but will forward any information from the NCAA that it receives on to WIAA member schools. The WIAA has not put anything specifically into the WIAA handbook to address credit recovery based upon NCAA regulations. It is up to guidance counselors and athletic coaches to see what is acceptable by the NCAA.

One of the biggest problems is with high school students who decided on their own to compete in collegiate athletics.

"They never told their guidance counselor that they wanted to play Division I athletics," says Kumke. "So when I talk to the guidance counselor and explain that this kid is not meeting the NCAA eligibility requirements, they respond, 'I had no idea that this is what this kid wanted to do.'"

She suggests that high schools clear all their credit recovery courses with the NCAA ahead of time. High school students should be informed upfront if the credit recovery course they are about to take is preapproved by the NCAA. □



using only a 60 percent passing rate on the final test. They also discovered no increase in knowledge and achievement. MPS didn't wait for the problems to bubble up into the media; it took action. Now the school system requires that student take all various sections regardless of the score, answer all the essay questions and answer 80 percent of the final test questions correctly. Students must take written notes in order to prove they are attempting to learn the material.

Nordine at WVS sees the setting of low-passing standards as a state-

wide problem. Most online curriculum providers let school districts set their own standards as to what is required for passing and how to award letter grades. WVS tries to give guidance to school districts as to what is acceptable and what will work.

WVS also demands that there must be someone at the school to work with the students. Each school must have a LEG (Local Education Guide), at the school working with the students who is a certified teacher. Often the LEG is a guidance counselor or a computer lab teacher, but it is best to have a content-area teacher in that field. But not every district uses WVS, and the fear is that some districts may be just sitting a student down in front of a computer with little or no support.

Additionally, not every student is a good candidate for online learning. "It takes a particular type of student who is ready to be an independent

learner, that is self-motivated, is a communicator, and has technology skills," says Nordine.

WVS runs an online screener to determine whether a student is a good candidate for online credit recovery.

"If a student can't do a three- or four-hour online orientation on how to get around the course... if they can't get through that, then I would seriously wonder if they could get through a whole semester course," says Nordine.

Students who take online learning courses need to be self-motivated. "Kids are basically spending most or all of the day in front of a computer ... It is hard for them to stay on task," Heinrich said.

### ■ Providing Student Support

Heinrich, Nordine and others all point to the need for a student to be at or near the appropriate reading level. Most online credit recovery courses are text driven, and if a student can't



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read the material, they are unlikely to complete the course work.

Too many districts think they can sign up kids with WVS, give them a computer, and the district does not have to do much of anything.

“Those are the districts that have kids who do not complete,” says Nordine. The districts “...have to put all the support they would have to do if that student was in a traditional classroom.”

Clearly student support is the key. Online programs must be seen as a tool, not the whole program. Schools must look to why students failed to pass in the first place.

Students who have been ill or have had personal problems that have been resolved may have enough motivation to complete an online

course. Online may also work for the student who one day wakes up to the realization that graduation may not take place unless they get serious. But that student must be interested in learning, not just getting credits.

If motivation is lacking, there is no electronic substitution for personal one-on-one counseling and teaching from an educational professional. That is the reason school systems are increasingly turning to a “blended” model where the student interacts with a teacher often in a traditional classroom setting while using the online educational program.

If the student can’t understand the material online, old-fashioned teacher tutoring may break the logjam. And if the student needs

a pat on the back or a hand held, a teacher can give the support that a computer mouse cannot give.

If done right, virtual programs really don’t save a district any money, not if the district is providing the necessary support system for its online students.

Reflects Nordine, “It can be done poorly, with high quality, and every place in between ... If it’s done with quality and preparing that student for that type of environment and experience, we are giving kids a good option.” ■

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