

Online Credit Recovery: Teachers' Perspectives on Lessons Learned

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Study Overview

The American Institutes for Research is studying the effectiveness of online credit recovery.¹ The study focuses on first-year high school students who failed Algebra 1 or English 9 (their ninth-grade English course) and retook the course during the summer before their second year of high school.² The study has two goals: (a) to determine if online credit recovery is an effective way to help students who are struggling and (b) to describe the online instructional experience.

The study compares an online learning model for credit recovery with the more typical teacher-directed credit recovery model. The online learning model implemented for the study included an online curriculum provided by a vendor and credentialed in-class teachers provided by the participating schools. The in-class teachers could provide individualized support and supplement the digital instruction. All classes were in the Los Angeles Unified School District and took place in a standard high school classroom during the district's 5-week summer session in 2018 and 2019.

This research brief is the fifth in [a series of briefs](#) for the *Online Credit Recovery Study*. More

Key Findings

- This brief highlights five lessons learned for improving the implementation of online credit recovery classes.
- Lesson 1: Districts should reserve class time for teachers to introduce students to any new online educational platform to mitigate technological challenges.
- Lesson 2: Districts should provide teachers with professional development on how to promote student engagement in online classes.
- Lesson 3: Districts should provide teachers with professional development on how to supplement the online course to better meet students' needs.
- Lesson 4: Districts should develop strategies to enhance culturally responsive pedagogy for online courses.
- Lesson 5: Districts should provide scaffolds for students who have not had opportunities to exercise self-regulatory skills in online courses.

information about the study’s design and methods is available in Brief 1.

About This Brief

As a supplement to the impact study, we conducted focus groups with Algebra 1 and English 9 teachers who taught both the online and teacher-directed credit recovery classes as part of the study. One goal of these focus groups was to garner information to help us better understand teachers’ experiences teaching the two types of classes. The results inform several “lessons learned” that have implications for districts and schools planning to implement online credit recovery courses.

Lesson 1: Districts should reserve class time for teachers to introduce students to any new online educational platform to mitigate technological challenges.

Although online courses hold the promise of allowing students to progress through the content at their own pace, unfamiliarity with the online platform slowed student progress. During the focus groups, several teachers said they liked that the online credit recovery course gave students the ability to move at their own pace. This opinion about the benefits of self-pacing mirrors what proponents of online courses say are one of the major strengths of online courses (Powell et al., 2015). However, teachers expressed concerns that the technology-related challenges encountered by some students made it difficult for these students to effectively progress through the curriculum. Specifically, teachers pointed out that student unfamiliarity with using the online platform prevented some students from being able to navigate the platform comfortably and work autonomously at their own pace. Teachers explained that although many students were technologically inclined when it came to social media and using their phones, they struggled to navigate the online platform on their own because they came to class having had fewer experiences with similar educational platforms.



I learned that a lot of the kids are not as familiar with computers as they need to be to be able to access all of this.



Our Analysis Approach

- We conducted four focus groups with a total of 11 participants: two focus groups for Algebra 1 teachers and two focus groups for English 9 teachers.
- The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed a semistructured interview format.
- After the focus groups, we assigned concepts, or codes, to segments of the data (i.e., what the teachers said during the focus groups) and linked the codes to establish relationships between them.³
- Our analysis of the focus group data revealed five key themes and represent important reflections that teachers had after teaching the online credit recovery class.

Teachers said that the steep learning curve for using an online educational platform added an additional barrier to being able to access and work through the course material.

In this regard, teachers emphasized that it is important for instructors of online courses to consider that not all students have experience or access to similar programs and educational tools; therefore, it may take time and support for students to feel comfortable with the online platform. Because the ease of use and comfort with the online program is key to engagement, providing scaffolding prior to the start of instruction may help students feel comfortable navigating the online platform.

Teachers also highlighted the importance of course instructors being comfortable and familiar with the online platform to best provide support for both content and technological issues. Making sure that teachers are able to provide students with technical support and allotting time for students to become familiar with the platform are critical steps to reduce access barriers and ensure that all students have an equitable learning experience when engaging in an online course.

Lesson 2: Districts should provide teachers with professional development on how to promote student engagement in online classes.

Teachers emphasized the importance and challenge of keeping students engaged with the digital course material. In the online classes, teachers found it difficult to replicate important facilitators of engagement, such as questioning and discussion, that come more naturally in teacher-directed classes. Teachers highlighted three barriers related to fostering student engagement in the online environment:

- Group instruction was less common in the online classes than the teacher-directed classes. Teachers reported that they view group instruction as a way to encourage students to ask questions and have discussions about the material, which they explained helps keep students engaged. With students working more independently and not necessarily at the same place in the work at the same time, these kinds of discussions were not always possible. In the online classes, teachers had to look for alternative ways other than large-group instruction to encourage students to ask questions and engage in discussions.
- Similarly, peer-to-peer questioning was less common in the online classes than the teacher-directed classes. For example, English teachers explained that in a teacher-directed course, feedback would take the form of conversations. Such conversations are a necessary part of the pedagogical approach and serve as a mechanism by which teachers can develop student engagement. Teachers said the online classes provided fewer opportunities for peers to ask each other questions compared with teacher-directed classes, which, in turn, could lead to less engagement with the course content.
- In addition, teachers found it more challenging to develop relationships with students in the online classes than the teacher-directed classes because students spend most of their time working independently. They said building those relationships helps students feel

comfortable to reach out, ask questions, and talk to the teacher about the support they need. Teachers explained that because many students often were hesitant to ask questions, it was difficult for teachers to identify when to reach out to students who needed additional support. In this regard, it is possible that not having those relationships and rapport with teachers may have negatively influenced student engagement in the online course.

Given these challenges, teachers recommended that schools provide teachers of online courses with opportunities for more professional development about supporting student engagement. Specifically, teachers called for professional development to support not only their use of the platform, as described in Lesson 1, but also strategies for building community in an online course environment, encouraging students to ask questions, and supporting students in fully engaging with the material. As one English teacher mentioned,

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Being able to clarify questions sometimes just made all the difference in whether somebody was making their way through one of the assessments or not.

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Lesson 3: Districts should provide teachers with professional development on how to supplement the online course to better meet students' needs.

One of the anticipated benefits of online courses is that they offer teachers the opportunity to personalize instruction. However, many teachers reported that it was difficult to address gaps in student understanding or tailor the materials to student interests within the constraints of the online curriculum. Several teachers reported that the online program made it easy to see where a student was at any point in time, but they found it more difficult to adjust the material to meet student needs in the online course. Teachers discussed challenges related to the online material being uniform and not flexible enough to address students' varying skill levels and interests:

- Some Algebra teachers pointed out that the online course did not provide flexibility to address gaps in student's foundational knowledge. One teacher mentioned, "The curriculum may be set at grade level, but students using the curriculum may not be at grade level." Teachers explained that it often was frustrating to see a group of students struggling in an area but not be able to make modifications that could better support their understanding. Some teachers also noted that students learn differently and respond to different types of interventions and scaffolding strategies. With undifferentiated material, such as content in the online curriculum, teachers found providing individualized support and scaffolding difficult or, worse, did not even recognize opportunities to scaffold the material.
- Teachers who taught Algebra and English reported that, because they were working with a curriculum that they did not create, they were less familiar with the material. Teachers

explained that being less familiar with the curriculum made it more difficult to teach and connect the material to their students' interests and the real world. Coupled with fewer opportunities for discussion, this prevented teachers from being able to make critical connections between the course content and student-lived experiences. One English teacher explained that when students are able to discuss the material, it supports their ability to draw connections to the material outside the classroom: "A critical part of being a good reader is being able to make those connections to the real world" Many teachers agreed that this important dynamic was lost in the online course, which they believed had a negative impact on student learning. Another English teacher suggested that if students did not already have the skill to make real-world connections before coming to the course, they would likely have a more difficult time engaging with the curriculum.

In this regard, supporting student learning was challenging for many teachers in the online course because they struggled to tailor the material to meet students where they were or engage with them in meaningful ways.

Allowing teachers the flexibility to supplement the online curriculum was an intended goal of the online model implemented for this study. However, the teacher focus group responses highlighted a two-faceted disconnect between the district's intentions for teachers to supplement the online course material and what happened in the online courses. First, some teachers did not understand that they could supplement the online course. Second, other teachers noted that they would have needed additional training and support to provide student-tailored and differentiated instruction in the classroom. Teachers suggested that, ideally, district leadership would provide training that requires teachers go through the online curriculum and discuss ways to supplement the material to improve the effectiveness of the program.

In addition, helping teachers supplement the online content can address a related issue that teachers raised about fewer ways to assess student performance in the online course. Specifically, teachers reported that, unlike a teacher-directed class that offers opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding based on various kinds of engagement (e.g., class discussion, extra-credit assignments), teachers relied on student performance within the online program, which was primarily quiz or test based. This relatively limited performance structure, teachers explained, may have disadvantaged those students who had trouble engaging with an online platform and could benefit from a more interactive class structure.

Thus, it is important that districts clearly communicate the options that teachers have related to supplementing the online content and assessing student performance for grading. Helping teachers supplement the online content with different materials and classroom exercises could give teachers additional ways to measure performance beyond the online curriculum-prescribed benchmarks and better support student needs in online courses.

Lesson 4: Districts should develop strategies to enhance culturally responsive pedagogy for online courses.

English teachers discussed challenges related to tailoring the course materials to reflect the experience and interests of their students. They explained that this is particularly important to ensure that the material is culturally relevant and meets students' needs. In the teacher-directed classes, teachers had the freedom to select texts for their students, which they indicated is critical to students' interest and engagement in the course material. In the online course, however, teachers were not able to tailor the material and reported noticing a difference in the way that students engaged: “. . . I noticed this past summer was that they just really weren't engaging—[the texts] weren't culturally relevant.” Culturally relevant texts allow students to feel connected to the literature and draw connections between what they are reading and the outside world. In teaching the online course, several English teachers reported that some materials in the curriculum, while of high quality, were not culturally relevant. Teachers reported struggling with not having the option of changing which texts students read because having the flexibility to select culturally relevant material is central to providing equitable and culturally responsive pedagogy that engages, represents, and validates the cultures of all students regardless of student background.

Thus, it is important that the district support teachers in ensuring that they can provide culturally relevant material to help students from different backgrounds have an equal opportunity to engage. In addition, teachers suggested that they should be given the curriculum far enough in advance to become familiar with the material. Becoming familiar with the curriculum, several teachers explained, would help them anticipate where students may have difficulty and give them an opportunity to create supporting materials that can be incorporated into the preset curriculum, as well as know when and where to probe students for feedback. In addition, teachers explained that having more time to become familiar with the curriculum could allow them to know when there were opportunities to bring in supplemental materials that might provide another cultural perspective and increase engagement among students.

Lesson 5: Districts should provide scaffolds for students who have not had opportunities to exercise self-regulatory skills in online courses.

Teachers highlighted that certain foundational regulatory skills underlie student success in an online course. Specifically, teachers reported that students who were comfortable guiding their own learning—for example, those who recognize when they are struggling, know when to ask questions, and know what questions to ask—did well in the online course. One teacher described what he observed among students who had more experience using these skills:

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[Students who guided their own learning] zoomed through it; they were like, I got this mess, I don't need your help, and they actually ended up doing very well. So, for them, something like the online platform actually gave them the kind of opportunity to do it at their own pace to a certain extent.

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Teachers noted that many students in their online credit recovery classes, however, were still honing these skills to the point of being able to consistently regulate their own learning. Although an online course provides the freedom for students to move at their own pace, it also places heightened demands on students' attentional and metacognitive skills. Specifically, teachers reported that many students had challenges directing their attention to stay on task and pace themselves through their work. Teachers also reported that many students struggled with the metacognitive task of reflecting on their own progress and checking their own understanding. Teachers explained that these challenges were more pronounced for first-year high school students, the focus population of our study, who likely had fewer prior opportunities to participate in courses to exercise these formative regulatory skills.

To increase opportunities for more students to take advantage of online credit recovery courses, the courses should be paired with supports that address gaps in credit recovery students' self-regulatory skills. For example, teachers could receive training on modeling and helping students think about the types of questions they need to ask themselves to ensure that they understand the material. Research shows that asking students to reflect on their experiences and giving them a frame for reflecting and gauging their own level of understanding supports their metacognitive skills and ability to guide their own learning as the online environment requires. In this regard, when students enroll in an online credit recovery course, districts and schools should make sure that teachers have opportunities to engage students in ways that support this kind of metacognitive thinking. Such opportunities to build foundational regulatory skills can help students succeed in online credit recovery classes.

Concluding Thoughts

This brief sheds light on some of the challenges that teachers experienced in teaching an online credit recovery course, as well as some lessons learned to address some of those challenges. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, online teaching and learning may become an increasingly important avenue for addressing missed learning opportunities. The findings of this brief are specific to teaching an Algebra 1 or an English 9 online credit recovery course within a school setting, but many of these lessons may help inform how district and school leaders can improve the use of online courses more broadly. Identifying ways to better support the success of students in an online learning environment is more critical than ever.

Notes

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² In addition to studying credit recovery during the summer, we conducted a supplemental study of credit recovery during the 2018–19 school year. This brief reports on findings only from the summer credit recovery classes.

³ To analyze the focus group data, we had the recorded conversations transcribed and then coded the data using content analysis and open axial coding (Laher et al., 2019).

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