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# PROMISING PRACTICES IN ONLINE LEARNING

## Using Online Learning for At-Risk Students and Credit Recovery



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IN ONLINE LEARNING

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## About *Promising Practices in Online Learning*

Online learning within K-12 education is increasing access and equity by making high quality courses and highly qualified teachers available to students. Online learning programs offer courses, academic credits and support toward a diploma. They vary in structure, and may be managed by a state, district, university, charter school, not-for-profit, for-profit, or other institution. Thirty states and more than half of the school districts in the United States offer online courses and services, and online learning is growing rapidly, at 30% annually. This growth is meeting demand among students, as more than 40% of high school and middle school students have expressed interest in taking an online course.

The most well established K-12 online learning programs are more than ten years old, and many programs have between five and ten years of operating experience. The newest programs are building on the expertise of those early adopters, as well as the experience of online learning in postsecondary institutions and the corporate world. A body of knowledge, skills and practices has been developed by individual programs, in collaboration with practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Because there are so many types of online programs (full-time, supplemental, state-led, district-level, consortium), there are also many different approaches to teaching, student support, professional development, and other issues.

This series, *Promising Practices in Online Learning*, explores some of the approaches being taken by practitioners and policymakers in response to key issues in online learning in six papers being released throughout 2008:

- Blended Learning: The Convergence of Online and Face-To-Face Education
- Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery and At-Risk Students
- Oversight and Management of Online Programs: Ensuring Quality and Accountability
- Socialization in Online Programs
- Funding and Legislation for Online Education
- A Parents' Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program

The title, *Promising Practices*, deliberately avoids the term "best practices." There are too many approaches to online learning, and too many innovative teaching and learning strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for one method to be labeled "best." Instead, this series aims to discuss the issues and explore examples from some of the many online programs across the country, with a goal of illuminating some of the methods showing the most promise.

Online learning offers the advantage of personalization, allowing individualized attention and support when students need it most. It provides the very best educational opportunities to all students, regardless of their zip code, with highly qualified teachers delivering instruction using the Internet and a vast array of digital resources and content. Through this series of white papers, we are pleased to share the promising practices in K-12 online learning that are already underway.

# Using Online Learning for At-Risk Students and Credit Recovery

Online learning programs are designed to expand high-quality educational opportunities and to meet the needs of diverse students. While the primary reason online courses are offered in school districts is to expand offerings to courses that would otherwise be unavailable, the second most commonly cited reason for offering online learning is to meet individual student needs, according to a survey done by the National Center for Education Statistics.<sup>1</sup> Today's online programs and schools offer a broad range of online courses and services to reach a variety of students, from struggling to gifted, who seek personalized pathways to learning opportunities.

Many educators are finding that online and blended learning are effective ways to reach students who fail one or more courses, become disengaged, or who seek an alternative to traditional education. Some of the early online programs that initially focused on high-achieving students, such as the Kentucky Virtual High School, have expanded offerings, and are finding success with a much broader range of students. As online learning moves past the early adopter phase, the growth of online programs focused on at-risk students or credit recovery has redefined how educational technology can be used to address the needs of all students, from advanced students in search of Advanced Placement or dual-credit courses, to at-risk students trying to find the right instructional mix to fit their learning styles.

As online programs increasingly focus on at-risk students and credit recovery, educators are finding that reaching these students presents a specific set of issues that are explored in this paper.

## Defining *credit recovery*

Credit recovery refers to a student passing, and receiving credit for, a course that the student previously attempted but was unsuccessful in earning academic credit towards graduation. Credit recovery often differs from "first time credit" in that the students have already satisfied seat time requirements for the course in which they were unsuccessful, and can focus on earning credit based on competency of the content standards for the particular course. Credit recovery programs, in general, have a primary focus of helping students stay in school and graduate on time.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NCES Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students, <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2005010/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.gavirtualschool.org/Default.aspx?tabid=170](http://www.gavirtualschool.org/Default.aspx?tabid=170)

## Defining *at risk*

The term at-risk does not have a single definition when applied to students in K-12 education. While there isn't universal agreement about the nature of the risk itself, most educators would concur that the ultimate risk is that the student will exit from his or her K-12 education before successfully completing it. These students may drop out, flunk out, be pushed out, or "age out" of school, but the impact on them and on society is fundamentally the same. This paper will use the term "drop out" to cover all of these.

## Characteristics of at-risk students

There are many elements that may predispose students to this risk. Some factors are based only on academic achievement. These include not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade level or to graduate from high school, falling behind other students of their age or grade level in educational attainment, failing two or more courses of study, or not reading at grade level.

Other factors linked to being at-risk include non-academic indicators that are believed to affect a student's likelihood of achieving success in school. Students who are pregnant, parents, incarcerated, or have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, among other factors, may be considered at-risk. A commonly cited paper considered students at-risk if they had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Low socio-economic status
- From a single parent family
- An older sibling dropped out of school
- The student had changed schools two or more times
- Had average grades of "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade
- Repeated a grade.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, multiple risk factors increase the likelihood that students will drop out. These factors fall into one or more categories: individual, family, school, and community. For most students, dropping out results from a combination of factors, often after a long process of disengagement that sometimes begins early in the child's educational years<sup>4</sup> or in the transition to high school. The report *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success* states that "academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out. Over 60% of students who eventually dropped out of high school failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade, while only 8% of their peers who eventually graduated had similar difficulty."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Chen, X. & Kaufman, P. (1997). "Risk and resilience: The effects of dropping out of school," quoted in "Broadening the definition of at-risk students", by Stephanie Bulger, and Debraha Watson, The Community College Enterprise, Fall 2006, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4057/is\\_200610/ai\\_n17191868/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4057/is_200610/ai_n17191868/pg_1)

<sup>4</sup> Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report, National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University and Communities In Schools, Inc. 2007

<sup>5</sup> *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success*, Nettie Legters and Kerri Kerr, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2001 [http://www.scusd.edu/com\\_office/fcpro/legters.pdf](http://www.scusd.edu/com_office/fcpro/legters.pdf)

Regardless of the exact definition, at-risk students are more likely than the student population as a whole to drop out of school, which is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as leaving school without a high school diploma or equivalent credential such as a General Educational Development (GED). The cost of dropping out—to students, communities, and the nation—are staggering, as described below.

## The impact: “The Silent Epidemic”

The report *“Ending the silent epidemic: A Blueprint To Address America’s High School Dropout Crisis,”*<sup>6</sup> sponsored by several organizations including the Gates Foundation and National Governors’ Association, describes the challenges that face U.S. schools—and society as a whole—because of students becoming disengaged and dropping out of school:<sup>7</sup>

- Every 29 seconds another student gives up on school, resulting in more than one million American high school students who drop out every year
- Nearly one-third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class
- Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, in poor health, living in poverty, on public assistance, or single parents with children who drop out of high school
- Dropouts are more than twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty in a single year and three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed
- Dropouts are more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as high school graduates
- Dropouts are four times less likely to volunteer than college graduates, twice less likely to vote or participate in community projects, and represent only 3 percent of actively engaged citizens in the U.S. today

The economic impacts of the failure of students to gain a high school diploma are significant at both individual and societal levels. According to the Gates report, “dropouts earn \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates and more than \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates.” Similarly, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the average high school graduate in 2004 earned approximately \$722 per month, nearly \$300 per month more than those without a high school diploma. A student who graduates from high school and goes on to attain either an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree benefits from even greater earnings potential. Over

“Nearly one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Of those who do graduate, only half have the skills they need to succeed in college or work.”

– *The Silent Epidemic*

<sup>6</sup> The Silent Epidemic, [www.silentepidemic.org](http://www.silentepidemic.org)

<sup>7</sup> [www.silentepidemic.org/epidemic/statistics-facts.htm](http://www.silentepidemic.org/epidemic/statistics-facts.htm)

a lifetime of work, a student who attains an Associate’s degree can expect to earn twice as much as a student who does not complete high school, a difference of over \$630,000.<sup>8</sup>

Annual Income <sup>a</sup>		Lifetime Income	
Bachelor’s Degree	\$52,200	Bachelor’s Degree	\$1,667,700
Associate’s Degree	\$38,200	Associate’s Degree	\$1,269,850
Some College	\$36,800	High School Graduate	\$994,080
High School Graduate	\$30,400	No High School Diploma	\$630,000
No High School Diploma	\$23,400		

The total economic impact of lost education goes well beyond the individual student’s earnings: *The Silent Epidemic* estimates that the government would reap \$45 billion in extra tax revenues and reduced costs in public health, crime, and welfare payments if the number of high school dropouts among 20-year olds in the U.S. today were cut in half.

If the cost of leaving high school without a degree is staggering, the value to the student of gaining a high school diploma and pursuing a post-secondary degree is equally large. For example, one student in the Complete High School Maize (CHSM) credit recovery program in Kansas was expelled from school three separate times. The student came back, became engaged with his online courses and teachers, and not only completed his diploma, but is now taking post-secondary classes and headed towards an Associate’s degree. This student went from the prospect of earning \$23,400 annually without a high school diploma, to the likelihood of earning \$38,200 a year with an Associate’s degree. To date, 90% of CHSM graduates are in careers, furthering their career education or training, or taking post-secondary classes. CHSM surveys approximately 95% of program graduates every three years to confirm the performance.

Twenty years ago, the General Accounting Office reported “the social costs of the dropout problem include an underskilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, and increased public assistance and crime.” All those factors are still true today, and students leaving their education prematurely remain an enormous problem for the public school system. One advantage, 20 years later, is the promise that online learning holds as a tool for engaging these students.

## Program options for working with at-risk students and credit recovery

The population of students needing credit recovery overlaps with the population of at-risk students, but the two groups are not exactly the same. Students need to recover credit because they have failed or dropped out of a class. A student who fails several classes is likely to be at-risk, but a student who fails only one class may not be. Conversely, a student may be identified as at-risk due to a variety of factors despite not having failed a single class.

<sup>8</sup> The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings, US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2002. [www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf)

<sup>a</sup> Tables are from [http://www.education-online-search.com/articles/special\\_topics/education\\_and\\_income](http://www.education-online-search.com/articles/special_topics/education_and_income), sourced from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau, The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings, US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2002

Programs providing credit recovery or addressing the needs of at-risk students have been provided in almost every variation of time, location and instructional method imaginable. Credit recovery programs have taken place in traditional classrooms during school hours, after regular school hours, in the evening and on weekends, in summer school, and through student-teacher correspondence. Some schools offer full alternative programs, while others focus on returning the student to the traditional classroom. Some credit recovery programs grant credit only for courses, while others grant credit for work experience and community service. Some target at-risk students enrolled in school, while others target dropouts who have left school. Some programs include home-bound students and those with special needs in addition to at-risk students, and some do not. Traditional curricular materials have been used, along with television, video, computer-based instruction, and, most recently, online learning.

A report from the U.S. General Accounting Office summarized dropout prevention programs in a similar way: “While dropout prevention programs can vary widely, they tend to cluster around three main approaches: (1) supplemental services for at-risk students; (2) different forms of alternative education for students who do not do well in regular classrooms; and (3) school-wide restructuring efforts for all students.”<sup>9</sup>

The variety of options illustrates the challenging nature of the problem. It also suggests that educators have not yet found a single approach that comprehensively addresses the needs of all at-risk students.

In recent years, an increasing number of online programs have begun focusing on offering credit recovery and serving at-risk students. In some cases, these programs started with this focus, while in other cases existing online programs expanded their focus beyond high-achieving students. Online learning is proving to be an important—and sometimes transformational—tool in reaching at-risk students. Goals related to credit recovery and at-risk students vary with each online program often they include one or more of the following:

- Help students make up credits to meet graduation requirements
- Meet graduation deadlines
- Prepare students for state exams
- Get dropout students back in school
- Provide educational equity for all students
- Meet budgetary concerns while trying to serve all students<sup>10</sup>

## **Working with at-risk students and credit recovery in practice**

As more schools use online learning options for credit recovery and at-risk students, there is a growing body of effective online instructional strategies. The examples that follow demonstrate some of these successful practices.

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<sup>9</sup> United States General Accounting Office, 2002, School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies. GAO-02-240

<sup>10</sup> Wisconsin Virtual School, [http://www.wisconsinvirtualschool.org/credit\\_recovery.asp](http://www.wisconsinvirtualschool.org/credit_recovery.asp)



## Aldine Independent Schools, Texas

### *A school district adds an online component to provide an alternative to the classroom for at-risk students*

Aldine Independent Schools began considering the use of technology to give at-risk students an alternative to traditional classroom instruction eight years ago. The district has approximately 60,000 students and had met with limited success with its credit recovery program. In 2000, the district recovered only 700 half-credits with its traditional remedial program. By 2007, Aldine's Online Learning Program generated approximately 4,500 half-credits for at-risk and drop out students. Along with transforming opportunities for at-risk students in the district, the online program has been recognized as an outstanding national example by the Principal's Partnership and the National Dropout Prevention Center.

Overcoming initial concerns about going to an online format was a critical early challenge faced by the credit recovery program. Many of the traditional classroom teachers expressed concerns over the quantity and quality of the online coursework, and there was concern that what was perceived as a move to computer-based instruction would adversely impact all of the teachers in the district. The Online Learning Program made several important moves to establish credibility and allay concerns. First, the program director recruited National Honor Society students to work with students in one-on-one tutoring. "We started by giving our Honor Society students training with the technology being used in the program," said Raylene Truxton, District Coordinator for Online Learning. "By having some of our best students participate in tutoring our online credit recovery students, teachers began to accept the online format." Second, the program established a policy requiring online students to pass a final exam to gain course credit, a hurdle that even students in the traditional classroom setting did not have to cross. Finally, master teachers from across the district were hired to collaborate on course and curriculum development, providing additional credibility.

The impact of the online credit recovery solution has been felt across the district. Teachers have not only accepted online learning as valid option for credit recovery, but have begun to embrace the use of online content in the classroom in a blended, whole-group setting. With training from the Online Learning Department, classroom teachers often start a session with online content to launch class discussion, use testing options provided with the curriculum, and even use student response devices to have classroom students competitively answer questions from the online curriculum. Aldine students are even gaining real world, international experience by participating in online collaboration and competition. Aldine fielded an international engineering team that placed high enough in the online competition that the school sent the team to Scotland for the finals.

## Florida Virtual School

### *Credit recovery courses delivered by a state-led supplemental program*

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is the largest online program in the United States, and one of the oldest. In the early days of the program most of the program's students were seeking Advanced Placement courses, accelerated learning opportunities, or scheduling flexibility. In recent years, credit recovery has become an increasingly important part of the program, to the point that nearly 20% of students in FLVS courses are seeking credit recovery, or *grade forgiveness* as it is referred to in Florida.

Unlike many online programs for credit recovery or at-risk students that use mostly (or entirely) a blended learning approach, FLVS primarily offers fully online, distance education courses that are self-paced. FLVS students who are recovering credit are not segregated into special class sections and mix readily with their peers. In many instances instructors are not even aware the students are enrolled in the course for credit recovery.

In addition to the fully online model led by FLVS teachers, FLVS is also partnering with nine school districts to provide online curriculum delivered by the local school district instructors. In these instances, the local school district provides the teacher of record and retains the FTE funding for the student. FLVS is also establishing physical e-learning centers in schools across the state where all types of students take FLVS courses on their school campus. FLVS provides the teacher of record and often the school provides a mentor or facilitator to provide additional assistance to the student.

“One of our challenges is to demonstrate the effectiveness of online learning for these students,” according to Brenda Finora, Public Affairs Liaison for Southwest Florida. “Some people still raise the question ‘If the students are not motivated enough to pass the course in the classroom, how can we expect them to be self-motivated in an online course?’ We find very little difference in the level of motivation between students seeking credit recovery and other FLVS students. They all come to FLVS for specific reasons with a drive to succeed.” If motivational or behavioral issues do arise, FLVS provides counseling or refers the student back to the local school counselor to work with the student individually.

In the 2006-2007 school year, FLVS students who self-reported taking courses for credit recovery had a passing rate of 90.2%, similar to the 92.1% passing rate for the entire FLVS student population.

“As more data is gathered it confirms what so many of us believe, that online learning gives students seeking credit recovery the individual attention they need to be successful,” reports Cindy Lohan, eSolutions Manager for FLVS. Success rates for students recovering credit have been remarkably similar to rates for the entire FLVS student population. In the 2006-2007 school year, FLVS students who self-reported taking courses for credit recovery had a passing rate of 90.2%, similar to the 92.1% passing rate for the entire FLVS student population.

A significant number of online programs outside Florida use FLVS curriculum, and the use of FLVS online curriculum for credit recovery has risen dramatically in recent years. This growth, in part, drove the development of diagnostic testing as part of the FLVS courses. For example, pre-tests in math courses identify both the material the student has mastered and the material that is still problematic. Diagnostic tests are being added to the FLVS courses most often needed for credit recovery.

## Jackson School District, Alternative School, Jackson, Michigan

### *Using online content to increase course options within the Alternative School*

Jackson School District has been running a successful alternative school in a traditional face-to-face format for years. The Alternative School tracks student course completion rates as they enter the program, and has found that 9<sup>th</sup> graders entering the program complete about 47-53% of their courses, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders achieve course completion rates in the range of 87-90%. Building on this success, the alternative school has now added an online component, with online curriculum and a 30-station classroom lab, to address a number of areas that will benefit their students. “We can’t meet all of the discipline-specific needs of students with one approach,” says Linn Hollosy, Alternative School Director.

The Alternative School has carefully selected high-interest, high demand online courses in career planning and basic math, and optional courses in digital photography and forensic science, to motivate students while they develop the independent learning skills, self-discipline and technology-based communication skills necessary to become successful online learners. The blended approach of working with online curriculum with the aid of a teacher in the lab setting provides the structure many of these at-risk students need while they develop the maturity to work independently. As the student demonstrates greater competency in completing courses through online study, the online curriculum options are expanded.

“We can’t meet all of the discipline-specific needs of students with one approach.”

– Linn Hollosy, Alternative School Director, Jackson, Michigan

This new approach allows the program to increase its curriculum offerings. In the past, a course with only 7 or 8 students may have been cancelled because the class was too small to warrant a teacher. Now students in several small enrollment courses in the same discipline can be combined in a common classroom lab with different online curriculums, allowing a single teacher to tutor across multiple courses concurrently.

The Alternative School is also maximizing the flexibility of online learning to keep credit recovery students on track towards course completion. Students that fall behind in a 9-week, face-to-face credit recovery classes can now spend up to 14 hours a week in the online lab, working concurrently with the face-to-face course. The students use online curriculum from the Michigan Virtual School to catch up and complete the course with their peers. By purchasing only the specific online courses it needs, Jackson Alternative School has the flexibility to mix and match online options with its traditional face-to-face alternative classes as needed and keep costs affordable.

## Online Learning Programs, Los Angeles Unified School District, CA

### *Credit recovery courses offered by a large school district in a blended environment*

The Los Angeles Unified School District’s (LAUSD) Online Learning Programs offers high school students a blended approach to credit recovery courses since its inception, combining various levels of face-to-face instruction with fully online curriculum and instruction. “We face the same issues

with online learners as we do in the classrooms: multiple languages, students at various reading levels,” says Kip Leland, LAUSD Online Learning Specialist. “We have to make the content and instruction engaging to grab students and keep them interested. If a course is largely text, you lose the attention of the students with reading deficiencies. Blended learning adds to the dynamic nature of instruction, whether in the classroom or online.”

Staff from LAUSD’s Educational Technology group work with schools in the district to offer a technology mix that includes online curriculum delivered by a course management system and web conferencing capability for both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. The blended approach allows for differentiated instruction—the teacher can begin a class session with a diagnostic exercise, and then decide to proceed with individual tutoring or group work based on the results.

The individualized pace of the online content removes the “culture of failure” by allowing students to test out of material familiar to them from their first experience with the course, then work through content in chunks with measured success. Students experience success quickly and are engaged by the content.

Professional development and teacher training have been important aspects of LAUSD’s online learning success. A year-long program for content development is provided that focuses on instructional design principles and a follow-up course on online instructional methodologies. Teachers may also take a 6-week course in online instruction, how to create community, and advanced use of online tools.

### **The Bridge Program, Salem-Keizer School District, Oregon**

#### ***An alternative online school for students who are at-risk or have dropped out***

In 2004, Salem-Keizer School District’s SK Online program launched the Bridge Program, an innovative approach to high school credit recovery. The program provides an alternative school that combines online curriculum and instruction with a classroom/computer lab component staffed by highly qualified teachers and mentors. The mandatory attendance and lab support provided in the physical locations create the structure and motivation the students need to succeed, while the online delivery of content and instruction provides the flexibility that allows these students to complete their diplomas.

Students take one course at a time, working to complete six to eight half-credit courses in succession during a semester. Bridge meets two hours a day in a supervised setting in computer classrooms. For convenience, hours and access are being added by expanding classroom locations to the early college high school for evening attendance, as well as a new downtown classroom to increase full-day accessibility. The combination of online and onsite instruction allows students to work at their own pace, while also providing the opportunity for face-to-face feedback to improve substandard performance and gain immediate credit for successful completion of a course.

One of the unusual aspects of the program is that it is proactive in seeking out at-risk students in the district, as well as students who have already dropped out of school. Students may be self-referred, or may be identified by counselors, school administrators, or parents as being on the brink of academic failure. Some students dropped out prior to enrolling in the program. “Typically,

Approximately 800 students drop out of the district's schools each year, and approximately 460 students are re-enrolled through the Bridge Program annually. By drawing these students back into school, the Bridge Program brings to the district more than \$2.7 million in funding tied to these students.

these students have transcripts showing significant credit deficits, a substantial pattern of academic failure, and lack of demonstrated proficiency in reading, math, writing, and/or speaking. For a variety of reasons, these students have little previous success in traditional high school.”<sup>11</sup>

The process begins with a face-to-face orientation for all students. Bridge students are expected to be in the lab every school day and to be working online offsite as well. Teachers may allow students to adjust their daily schedule upon verification of employment hours, as about 20% to 25% of the students are working. Most of the working students participate in the Work Experience program and earn up to four elective credits while learning on the job. Work experience is verified by paycheck stubs or W-2 forms, an employer questionnaire, and a positive evaluation by an employer.

The Bridge Program instructional team begins with a licensed online teacher of record, who usually works with students remotely online, but visits the Bridge classrooms as necessary. In addition to the online teacher, each Bridge classroom is staffed by two part-time instructional assistants for two hours per day to provide “at-the-elbow” instruction. A part-time school office specialist handles registration and other student data management tasks, including phone calls to motivate students to meet attendance requirements. A licensed part-time Special Education teacher assists students with Individual Education Plans, and a part-time guidance counselor is available to students as well.

The student's first contact with Bridge is an intake specialist, the primary point of welcome, who leads student orientations and assists with Bridge enrollment. Once the student is placed at a Bridge site, the Bridge instructional assistants and teachers welcome the student and maintain contact through face-to-face time in the lab, plus email and telephone. For each student, an academic plan is created that provides a roadmap to completion. The student's progress toward completion is monitored regularly by the lead teacher, instructional assistant, and counselor.

Bridge contacts students through multiple methods: 1) counselors in the neighborhood high school may refer students to Bridge; 2) three community school outreach staff use District “early-leaver” lists to contact students who have dropped out; and 3) non-attending students may self-refer.

At first educators questioned whether the program would be successful, given the characteristics of many at-risk students. If reasons for classroom failure included a lack of motivation and organizational skills, was it a fair expectation that these students would complete a complete online curriculum if individual support was provided?

Now in its fourth year, Bridge is already deemed a successful program by Oregon educators and has

<sup>11</sup> Bridge Program Conceptual Description, Jim Saffells, SK Online Bridge Program white paper, January 2008

been the subject of three doctoral dissertations. “For many Bridge students, simply passing a single course represents the first academic success he or she has accomplished within recent memory,” said Jim Saffeeles, Assistant Principal of Roberts High School and SK Online. “When we began in 2004, 306 courses were completed with 12 students earning a diploma. In Spring 2007, 365 students were enrolled in Bridge with over 100 students earning diplomas.”

The Bridge Program is proving to be financially self-sustaining as well. Three “dropout recovery experts” identify, find and enroll at-risk students who have dropped out or are at-risk. Approximately 800 students drop out of the district’s schools each year, and approximately 460 students are re-enrolled through the Bridge Program annually. By drawing these students back into school, the Bridge Program brings to the district more than \$2.7 million in funding tied to these students. In addition, by keeping at-risk students in school the district maintains the funding for those students.

Building on its success, SK Online now partners with Oregon school districts across the state. SK Online provides online courses and online infrastructure, certified teachers, staff development, assistant staff, and ongoing technical assistance. Each participating school district supplies a classroom with computers and Internet access, administrative support to deal with behavioral, discipline and emergency issues, instructional technology and financial systems, and additional clerical help as needed.

## Volusia County Schools, Florida

### *Online courses support at-risk students across the district*

Volusia County Schools has been applying technology to address credit recovery since a grant allowed the district to implement a 10 station VAX file server in 1992. The initial targets for the program were students who had dropped out, but just as the technology has evolved to online delivery, so has the audience for Volusia’s credit recovery program. Today the online program supports all nine high school campuses and alternative education sites in the district.

Volusia uses fully online curriculum in computer classrooms to provide a combination of flexibility and structure at-risk students. Highly qualified teachers work with students one-on-one to create individualized learning plans, tutor and coach students through difficult content areas, and track student progress. In addition to the successful delivery of online curriculum in the face-to-face setting, Volusia’s online program is expanding to give select students such as single mothers more autonomy to complete assignments from home.

Throughout its years of using digital curriculum for credit recovery, Volusia has always found the need to modify and combine materials from various vendors. Volusia content specialists review each

“Online credit recovery is a different model than teaching in the traditional classroom. The teacher is not only working with the academic aspect of the student, but with the student as a whole. Students need to be in charge of their own progress. When they have this epiphany, there’s no stopping them.”

– Carol Downing, Credit Retrieval Specialist, Volusia County Schools, Florida

course to match the content to district guidelines and make modifications. Volusia uses the Apex Learning curriculum for the bulk of the program's courses, but utilizes other content as well.

Use of a proven online curriculum provides uniformity of content to address both equity and attendance issues, as Volusia has a significant transitory population with students who often move from one school to another. Pre-tests and assessments provide an integral part of the curriculum to give the student and teacher a clear picture of where the student is in any given course. The district has found that the course content must have credibility and rigor to earn respect of teachers and parents, and to avoid giving students an incentive to move out of the classroom and into the computer lab.

Teachers working with at-risk students find they are taking on new roles such as helping students set goals, identifying and modifying negative behavior early on, and instilling the idea that students need to know where they are in the learning program at any given moment. "Online credit recovery is a different model than teaching in the traditional classroom. The teacher is not only working with the academic aspect of the student, but with the student as a whole," notes Carol Downing, Credit Retrieval Specialist, Volusia County Schools. "Students need to be in charge of their own progress. When they have this epiphany, there's no stopping them."

"Our lesson learned is that the power to succeed doesn't reside with the teacher. It lies with the student," said Downing. "Our job is to empower the student to be successful and the blended approach helps them to succeed."

## Lessons learned

The promise of using online learning in providing an alternative method of instruction for at-risk students is demonstrated by the increasing number of school districts implementing online curriculum with at-risk students and dropouts, and the success of many of these online credit recovery programs.

### Key lessons demonstrated by these programs include:

- Motivating students who have failed in the traditional classroom setting is a key to success for credit recovery programs. The flexible and self-paced nature of online courses can motivate; these attributes can also remove the social stigma of credit recovery. Online courses may be more engaging to some students than traditional face-to-face classes. In addition, programs that use online courses can address mobility issues of students who move regularly from one school in the district to another.
- Online learning is particularly well suited for students recovering credit because it allows for individualized instruction, both by the teacher and through the use of course management technology. Online curriculum must be rigorous to ensure that students are learning the material, and not simply moving through the course. Diagnostic testing that allows students to demonstrate mastery of the elements of a subject that they learned in their previous attempt to pass the course, and to move on to the parts of the course that they need to focus on, keeps students engaged.

- The self-paced aspect of online courses is particularly valuable to at-risk students, who may associate education with difficulties and stress, compounded by learning deadlines imposed by arbitrary calendars or school hours.
- Providing credit for work or community service allows students to be engaged in a valuable activity outside of school and to have this experience count towards graduation. It also motivates students to complete the program.
- Most online programs serving credit recovery and at-risk students—but not all—have a significant face-to-face component. The blended approach is important because it provides expanded student support and face-to-face contact. The online component—whether fully online or blended—provides 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to a group of students who often have less than average exposure to computers and technology.
- Programs that keep students from dropping out or attract students back into the school system may pay for themselves—or at least defray costs—by capturing the state public education dollars tied to those students. Online programs are particularly scalable and able to expand more easily than programs based entirely on brick-and-mortar classrooms.
- Success stories and anecdotes regarding the benefits and value of online learning for both at-risk students and the schools serving them abound. The need exists for federal funding of quantitative research in this area.

## Looking ahead

As education reformers point out, the number of students who drop out of school every year is a shocking indictment of the American public education system. If an epidemic abruptly forced one million students per year to drop out of school and kept one-third from graduating on time, our political leaders would be forced to develop a compelling plan to stop the menace threatening society. However, because this issue has developed slowly, it is not broadly recognized as the crisis that it is.

Teachers working with at-risk students may be frustrated by their students' boredom, lack of interest in school, and inability to make the connection between learning and success in life. At the same time, these teachers are often pressured by school administrators, policymakers, and politicians to raise graduation rates. Too often, the pressure to "do something" conflicts with the need to actually arm students with the real skills they need to achieve success in post-secondary education or work. Instead of challenging students to raise their performance to the level they must reach to be successful, too often credit recovery "solutions" have lowered the bar for passing.

Among the worst offenders in this regard are some products and programs that call themselves "online." These are often programs that are low-cost, have very low levels of teacher involvement, and require very little of students. They are used primarily because they are inexpensive, and they allow schools to say students have "passed" whether they have learned anything or not.

These programs have very little in common with the online programs that are raising the bar of rigor and academic achievement for their students. Many teachers and administrators realize that online courses and programs can offer a different kind of learning environment, take advantage of true personalization, and challenge students to achieve at the levels at which they are capable. As one educator says: "Because of the e-learning aspect of our credit-recovery program, it also seems that



students have changed their attitudes toward credit recovery. They realize that credit recovery is not all worksheets, repetition and drudgery; it also means relearning the standards in engaging and interesting formats with lots of visuals and graphics to help students learn.”<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the basic instructional strategies at the heart of these approaches to working with at-risk students pre-date online learning, and there have been successful credit recovery programs that connected with students in ways that don’t include involve computers. Unfortunately, however, these accomplished programs have been the exception rather than the rule, and clearly no successful and replicable model has yet emerged. Online learning holds the promise of creating new, innovative approaches, and online programs are already showing the way.

As Susan Patrick, CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning, states “When students have completed the attendance required in a course, and were unsuccessful, the options for earning credit towards graduation are often limited to using the same book, often with the same teacher, within the same seat time approach. Is this really the best way to invest resources of time and money in helping students succeed? One alternative is a well-designed online credit recovery program based on pace and performance. If a student has learned 40% of the material, online credit recovery allows accelerated learning based on competency. If a student is struggling with a lesson, the teacher can focus instruction where the student needs the greatest support. This individualization and personalization allows students to feel a one-to-one connection with their teachers and engages them with the material more thoughtfully. Online options also expose students to new models of learning that open their minds to the options e-learning can offer in high school and beyond. When students have struggled, and online learning opens up new pathways to success, they can find alternative ways to learn and to graduate, while also developing new skills for success in life.”

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<sup>12</sup> John Washburn, Categorical Coordinator, Castle Park Middle School, THE Journal, [http://thejournal.com/articles/16888\\_2](http://thejournal.com/articles/16888_2)



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