Credit Recovery and Proficiency-Based Credit

Maintaining high expectations while providing flexibility

Improving high school graduation rates has become the focus of virtually every high school, district and state nationwide, as dropout rates in many areas remain unacceptably high. And as 80-90% of students voice the expectation that they will go to college (and federal labor projections support the need for a more educated workforce), greater numbers of states are making a "college- and career-ready" high school curriculum the default curriculum to earn a high school diploma.

Many education stakeholders at the state and local level are wondering how it is possible to raise high school graduation rates while increasing the number and rigor of courses required for a high school diploma. Credit recovery and proficiency-based credit are being adopted by a growing number of states that are working to simultaneously increase graduation rates, create a default "college/ career-ready" high school curriculum, and provide acceleration options for students.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* will address the following questions:

- What is credit recovery? What is proficiency-based credit?
- How is credit recovery different from traditional remediation?
- Why does providing for these options matter for high school completion?
- How widespread are these options across the states? And what do state policies look like?
- What are the challenges in implementing credit recovery and proficiency-based credit programs?
- What does the research say on the effectiveness of credit recovery and proficiency-based credit?
- What are the essential policy components?

What's Inside

2010 JUNE Vol. 12, No. 3

THE PROGRESS OF Education Reform

Education Commission of the States

What is credit recovery? What is proficiency-based credit?

Credit recovery is an alternative to course repetition for students who have previously failed a course needed for high school graduation. Programs may be offered via computer software, online instruction (including through a state's virtual high school or a local virtual school) or teacher-guided instruction (small group or one-on-one), and are typically targeted at the standards in which students were deficient, rather than all standards in the original course.[1]

Proficiency-based credit is an option for students to demonstrate mastery of key knowledge and skills in a given course in lieu of completing seat time. Some states leave the process for that demonstration of mastery completely to district determination, while other states specify passing scores on assessments that may substitute for course completion, or other criteria students must meet.

In a nutshell: credit recovery is for students who are making a second attempt at earning credit for a particular course; proficiency-based credit is generally (but not always) for students who have not yet attempted a course but may already possess the knowledge and skills taught in the course.

How is credit recovery different from traditional remediation?

Credit recovery differs in several key ways from the forms of remediation familiar to most policymakers. The table below sets forth the main differences between the two approaches.

	Traditional remediation	Credit recovery
Which grades?	Any grades K-12	Typically high school; some states provide for grades 6-12
How are students identified?	Students may have failed a state or local exam or course, or may have been identified as *likely* to fail a course	Students who have previously failed a course (oftentimes one required for high school graduation)
When is a student "done"?	Normally seat time completion	When student has demonstrated mastery of targeted knowledge/skills (how a student does this varies depending on state policy – may be an end-of-course exam, or online module)
Program goal	Improve student proficiency in the targeted subject	Increase high school graduation rate, and improve students' college/career readiness

Why does providing for these options matter for high school completion?

For credit recovery:

- Requiring students who are missing a few key concepts in a mandatory course to retake the entire course is not an efficient use of school resources or student time.
- Students who must retake an entire course they previously failed or who must participate in remediation not targeted to their specific areas of need may feel frustrated and decide that finishing high school is not in their best interest.
- Sometimes students fail to earn credit for a course because they haven't performed all of the required tasks, haven't consistently attended class or have gotten crossways with the teacher. Credit recovery is one means of making up for prior bad decisions.

For proficiency-based credit:

- Insisting that students who already possess the knowledge and skills to be acquired in a given course complete seat-time requirements to earn the course credit is not a good use of school resources or student time.
- Requiring such students to fulfill seat-time mandates to earn the course credit may convince them that finishing high school is not worth the time and effort.
- Enticing dropouts to return to school and earn a standard diploma is more feasible if those students can pursue an accelerated pathway to that diploma and can accommodate family or work commitments.

How widespread are these options across the states? And what do state policies look like?

Credit recovery: A listing of the states that use the term "credit recovery" in statute or regulation does not provide an accurate national picture, as statutes and administrative code in some states simply reference credit recovery without providing parameters for local programs. In other words, a state policy continuum exists, where at one end policy simply references credit recovery (i.e., when counseling students on graduation expectations), and at the other end policy sets forth essential components for local programs.

Proficiency-based credit: In 2007, ECS identified 37 states that either offered proficiency-based credit or had plans to do so, and since then, several other states have adopted similar policies. As with credit recovery, state policies vary significantly if analyzed along a continuum based on three questions:

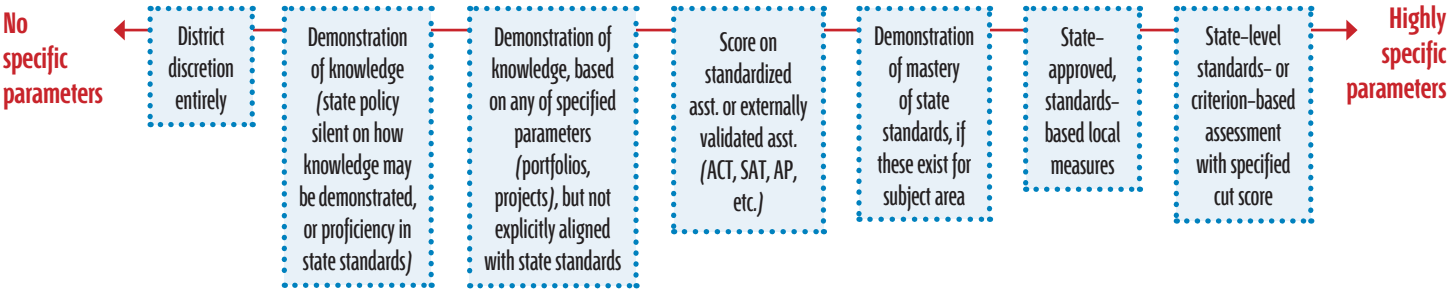
1. *Are districts required to offer a proficiency-based credit option?*
   Some states require all districts to make proficiency-based credit available, while others simply authorize district choice in such matters.

2. *Are the standards for determining proficiency set at the state level or locally established?*
   Some states specify that students may earn credit by earning a passing score on a statewide test, and in some cases, set the bar for a passing score fairly high. In states with the least restrictive policies, the method of determining student mastery is completely at the district's discretion. A statewide standard can help ensure that expectations are consistently high; locally-set expectations could sometimes result in lower expectations.

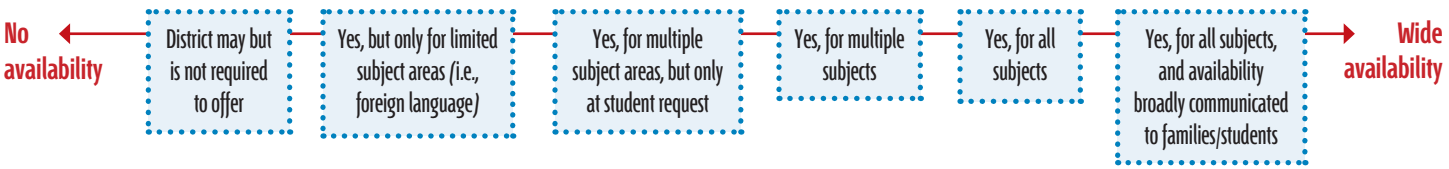
3. *May students earn credit via proficiency for all courses or only certain courses?*
   In some states, any course can be completed by demonstration of proficiency. **New Hampshire** is seen as having the broadest and clearest policy in this regard. All local boards are required to have a competency assessment in place for any course offered by a high school in its jurisdiction. In other states, students may earn proficiency-based credit only in subjects for which a statewide assessment has been developed. In states with the narrowest policies, only foreign language credit may be earned via competency.

Continuums for proficiency-based credit policies

1. Standards for determining proficiency — is course credit awarded based on...?



2. Availability



What does the research say?

Admittedly, little to no research is available at this time on the effectiveness of credit recovery programs, perhaps because the option is so relatively new. Slightly more research is available on proficiency-based credit, but little if any research notes how well students who have earned credit via proficiency subsequently fare in courses in the same subject area. This may be because longitudinal student data systems allowing for the tracking of student progress over time are still in their infancy in most states, or that credits completed via competency are not flagged as such in state data systems.

However, a **Texas** dropout recovery effort that includes online credit recovery among its approaches has demonstrated results. A 2010 report on the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program (TDRPP) notes that between August 2008 to May 2010, 4,141 former dropouts had enrolled in the TDRPP. Of these former dropouts, 31% achieved their stated goal of either earning a high school diploma or college readiness, while 33% were continuing in the program. Just over one in three participants (36%) had left the program before earning a high school diploma or achieving college-readiness goals.[2] While the credit recovery component of this program is not the sole factor in aiding these students toward their educational goals, this report suggests that credit recovery shows potential for contributing to the flexibility that older students, who may be working parents, benefit from.

What are the essential policy components?

Each of the following components is likely to improve student access to and program quality of credit recovery and proficiency-based credit offerings.

Credit recovery:

- *Requiring the offering of credit recovery courses*: In an era where credit recovery can easily be offered online or via computer modules, credit recovery should be an option for students statewide, not only in districts that elect to offer it. **Idaho** requires districts to implement a credit system by grade 7 that includes credit recovery. Any student not meeting the minimum requirements of the credit system must be given an opportunity to recover credits or complete an alternate mechanism to become eligible for promotion to the next grade.[3] **Colorado** requires each middle and high school's school performance report to identify whether credit recovery programs are available.[4]
- *Getting the word out*: Students can't go if they don't know.
- *Availability*: To the extent possible, credit recovery programs should be made available through the state's virtual high school or other means accessible to all students statewide (open credit-bearing courseware). The enabling legislation for the South Carolina Virtual School Program states that one of the purposes of the program is to offer students access to credit recovery programs.[5]
- *Finance*: The short-term costs of credit recovery will vary significantly, based on whether schools offer computer-based modules (lowest-cost), online courses (mid-range cost), or small group or one-on-one teacher-led instruction (greatest cost). **Colorado** has established a student re-engagement grant program to provide funds for local education providers to provide educational services and supports to students to maintain student engagement and support student re-engagement in high school. Grant applications must include a description of the local education provider's policies and practices related to course completion and credit recovery.[6]
- *State standards*: Programs should be aligned with state standards and allow students to target just those standards the student did not meet the first time, not all standards in the course.
- *Pacing*: Programs should be self-paced and competency-based (rather than based on a rigid progression of concepts or completion of a certain number of seat hours).
- *Quality of instruction*: More research is needed to determine which elements ensure that credit recovery programs are of high quality. As with any blended learning models, quality and accountability are important, and states should consider elements that reflect this. **Florida** legislation, for example, urges districts to use learning gains and other appropriate data and provide incentives to reward high-performing teachers in credit recovery and intensive intervention courses.[7] Using learning gains as a major part of evaluating the quality of content and courses makes good sense. States might additionally consider using incentives aimed at the development of open-source instructional modules. The Digital Learning Council's 10 Elements of Digital Learning also provide guidance to states.[8]
- *Clear program completion expectations*: State policies should clarify how a student can demonstrate that s/he has mastered the concepts that caused the student to fail the course the first time. States with end-of-course exams often specify that the student must pass the related end-of-course exam to earn course credit. **Louisiana** requires students to either (1) complete the course requirements for a computer-based credit recovery program approved by the department of education (DOE) or (2) pass a DOE-approved final exam, which may be a DOE-developed end-of-course exam or locally developed final exam. The DOE's Division of Student Standards, Assessments, and Accountability must approve the locally developed exam and passing score.[9]

- *Evaluation*: States should consider reviewing credit recovery programs on a regular basis to determine the percentage of students who eventually earn the missed credit through credit recovery, and retooling program offerings as needs are identified.
- *Taking it to the next level*: States and districts should ensure there is a support system if a student is still struggling (one-on-one assistance if a student is not improving).

Proficiency-based credit:

- *Requiring the offering of proficiency-based credit*: Access to acceleration options should not hinge upon an accident of geography.
- *Clear, commonly-held performance expectations*: Students should demonstrate mastery of either state-level standards (i.e., via a state-level end-of-course exam), or of local standards that have undergone external review or state approval, rather than locally-approved criteria, which may vary considerably from one locale to another.
- *Broad options*: Students should be able to earn credit by proficiency in an array of courses. **New Hampshire** requires local boards to have a competency assessment in place for any course offered by a high school in its jurisdiction.[10]
- *Getting the word out*: If you build it, they will come, but only if they know this option exists. **Oklahoma** directs each district to annually disseminate to students and parents materials explaining the opportunities of proficiency-based promotion, and calls for proficiency criteria for each core curriculum area to be made available upon request.[11]

ECS Resources

High School Graduation Requirements: Additional High School Graduation Requirements and Options

Details on proficiency-based credit policies in 37 states. To be updated in 2011!
http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=740

Helping Students Get a Head Start on the "Real World": State Strategies for Early High School Graduation

State policies and best practices related to proficiency-based credit, as well as other approaches to help motivated students graduate before the end of their senior year.
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/86/05/8605.pdf

Beyond the GED: State Strategies to Help Former Dropouts Earn a High School Diploma

State policies on multiple approaches—including credit recovery—to help returning dropouts complete graduation requirements without compromising standards. Approaches are equally applicable to students at risk of dropping out.
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/78/47/7847.pdf

COMING IN 2011!

An analysis of state policies related to proficiency-based credit, designed to identify where state policies fall across three key policy questions: *(1)* Mandatory or permissive? *(2)* Statewide standard or locally-set standard? *(3)* All courses or certain courses?

Other Resources

FIRST CHOICE Implementation Guide 2009-2010

A section on credit recovery provides district guidelines for four program areas—admission and removal, instruction, content and curriculum, and grades—that may inform thinking around state-level policy.
http://www.alsde.edu/general/FIRST_CHOICE_Implementation_Guide.pdf

Endnotes

1 ALA. ADMIN. CODE R. 290-3-1-.02

2 Texas Education Agency and ICF International, *Texas High School Completion and Success Final Report on Performance of Programs Authorized by House Bill 2237, December 1, 2010,* http://www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=2147490817&libID=2147490814 (accessed May 25, 2011).

3 ID ADC 08.02.03.107.

4 1 COLO. CODE REGS. § 301-1:2202-R-11.05(F)(21).

5 S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-16-15.

6 COLO. REV. STAT. ANN. § 22-14-109(2)(B)(V).

7 FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1003.413(3)(D).

8 Digital Learning Now, "The 10 Elements of Digital Learning," http:www.digitallearningnow.com/?page_id=20, (accessed June 17, 2011).

9 LA. ADMIN. CODE. TIT. 28, § CXV.2324(B)(5).

10 N.H. CODE ADMIN. R. ANN. ED. 306.27(D).

11 OKLA. ADMIN. CODE § 210:35-27-2(E).

Past issues of The Progress of Education Reform are available on our Web site at: www.ecs.org/per.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* was made possible by a grant from the GE Foundation. It was written by Jennifer Dounay Zinth, Senior Policy Analyst, Education Commission of the States. Contact her at 303.299.3689 or jdounay@ecs.org.

GE Foundation

The Education Commission of the States is a nationwide nonprofit organization formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education. ECS is the only nationwide, nonpartisan interstate compact devoted to education at all levels.

Past issues are available in print from the Education Commission of the States for $7 plus postage and handling. Please order from:
ECS Distribution Center
700 Broadway, Suite 810
Denver, CO 80203-3442;
303.299.3692; fax: 303.296.8332
or e-mail us at: ecs@ecs.org.
ECS accepts prepaid orders, Visa, MasterCard and American Express.
All sales are final.
Pricing subject to change.

Postage and handling charges apply if your order totals:
Up to $10.00 – $3.50
$10.01–25.00 – $5.00
$25.01–50.00 – $6.50
$50.01–75.00 – $9.25
$75.01–100.00 – $10.75
Over $100.01 – $12.00

Discounts are available for bulk orders of past issues:
10–49 – 10% discount
50–99 – 20% discount
100+ – 30% discount.

Equipping Education Leaders, Advancing Ideas