

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

The Impact of Alternative Education Credit Recovery on the Academic Success of Students At Risk of Dropping Out

Ms. Emily Freeland
ekfreeland@gmail.com

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Funding Source

No funding was needed.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

No funding was needed.

Scope and Setting

This study was conducted in Alabama at five different school sites. The selected sites were alternative education credit recovery dropout prevention programs that targeted students who were one or more years behind in credits earned for high school graduation. These programs served students in districts with multiple high schools and employed teachers and guidance counselors. In all but one of the schools, placement in the program was considered a last option to help students graduate on time with their cohorts, and students were not allowed to return to their home schools if they had been unsuccessful in meeting the requirements of the program.

Focus groups from the five alternative education credit recovery programs were used for this study (Table 1). Each of the programs utilized the same instructional software (A+ Anywhere Learning System), but each had unique characteristics related to the design and implementation of the overall school program.

Table 1

Demographics and Components of Programs

	Program A	Program B	Program C	Program D	Program E
# of Students in the District	8,341	9,541	11,081	9,299	28,616
# of High Schools	6	7	4	2	8
% Caucasian Students	86	92	68	65	72
% FR Lunch	55.32	61.62	52.75	20.53	32.84
# of Teachers	3	2	1	5 (Shared with disciplinary alternative program)	4
CTE Component	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Unique Component	ACT Prep	JROTC	Grad Coach	Face-to-Face Instruction w/software support	Full-time Counselor
# of Students Served in 2012-2013	31	85	55	41	136
Grad Rate	80+%	80+%	90+%	NA	80+%

Staffing Pattern

See Table 1 for specifics about each program. The research was conducted by a single researcher.

Population Served

- Number of students, subjects, or participants:
In total there were 11 female students and 14 male students.
- Description of project participants (ages, grades, demographics, etc.):
Fifteen students were white/Caucasian, 6 were African American, 3 were Hispanic, and 1 was biracial.
- Participant selection criteria:
Participants were selected based on unique characteristics to maximize variation of dropout risk factors. They were also selected based on recommendations by the counselor with input from the teachers and administrators. Participants were at least 17 years old, had multiple credits to recover or gain to be eligible for graduation, and had participated in the program for at least a semester.

Project Origination

Although numerous studies document the reasons students disengage from school and drop out, there is a lack of evidence related to student perceptions of credit recovery programs in an alternative environment and the program's impact on students' academic success. This study was designed to fill the gap in the literature and aid in the design of effective dropout prevention programs.

Observations and group interviews were conducted with students who were participating in alternative education credit recovery programs. An interview guide was developed. Data on program completers, graduation rates, and Career and Technical Education program enrollment were also examined.

A thorough examination of the literature contributed to the understanding of students who were most at risk of dropping out of high school, factors that contributed to a lack of academic success in a traditional high school setting, and the role that credit recovery in a nontraditional environment played in academic success. Conclusions drawn helped identify factors that contributed to academic success for at-risk students. The results of this study will be useful to educational leaders in identifying programs and strategies to help students that are potentially at risk of dropping out of school.

Issues Addressed

The purpose of credit recovery programs is to increase the number of students who graduate from high school in four years and to reduce the number of students who drop out of school. They are designed for students who have been unsuccessful in mastering content or skills required to receive course credit or earn promotion. Credit recovery programs allow high school students, who meet certain criteria, the opportunity to regain lost credit by focusing on deficiencies rather than having to repeat the entire course, as well as a self-pacing option to move ahead. In this way, credit recovery programs provide an alternative, more efficient method for students to get back on track and resume a successful high school career.

The issues that were addressed as part of the study were negative perceptions of teachers, retention, transiency, influences outside of school, isolation and sacrifice, importance of caring relationships, academic support, academic rigor, self-pacing, and motivation and hope.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

This study was guided by the following problem question: What can we learn from the perception of students in academic alternative school programs that would help administrators and teachers design unique programs that will help at-risk students graduate on time from high school?

The study's related questions that were examined included the following:

1. What factors do at-risk students perceive have contributed to their lack of academic success in the traditional school environment?
2. How do at-risk students perceive the level of instructional rigor of software-based programs as compared to instructional rigor of the traditional classroom and its ability to increase engagement in learning?
3. How do at-risk students perceive the role and relationship of the teachers in alternative education credit recovery programs that are software based?
4. How do at-risk students perceive that alternative education credit recovery in a nontraditional school environment contributed to their academic success?

Strategies and/or Interventions

The alternative education credit recovery programs used for this study provided learning opportunities for academic skills and life skills. Four of the five programs also offered opportunities for proficiencies in Career and Technical Education. Students participating in the programs were referred by the counselors or administrators from the home high schools they attended. These students were at least one year behind in grade-level credits earned and had completed at least one year of high school. These programs were housed at the home schools or an alternative site located within the district.

The purpose of these programs is to help students who are a year or more behind in accruing credits for graduation to catch up with their grade-level cohort. In all but one of the schools, the placement in the program is considered a last option to help these students graduate on time with their cohort, and students are not allowed to return to their home schools if they have been unsuccessful in meeting the requirements of the program.

Unlike disciplinary alternative programs, which serve students who have committed major disciplinary violations, students participate in alternative education credit recovery programs primarily because they are significantly behind in earning credits toward graduation. Students who are referred from their home schools to programs in this study usually have attendance issues and may have had a few minor disciplinary infractions. Students in these programs are admitted for attendance until they complete their courses. In most of the programs, students are not allowed to return to their home schools, as enrollment in the program is considered a last option. Due to students being significantly behind in credits required for graduation, the acceleration provided by the programs provides the students with their only path to graduating before they exceed the age limit for attendance in the traditional school program.

Each of the programs utilizes the same software program for instruction, but each had unique characteristics related to the design and implementation of the overall school program.

Project Timeline

The research and data collection process for this study took approximately three years, with the research component taking up the bulk of that time.

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project

Knowledge of alternative education credit recovery programs and their components was helpful for this study. Research and data collection and analysis skills were needed.

Outcomes and Achievements

Factors were identified that had a role in the lack of academic success of students in the traditional school environment. In the traditional school environment, students perceived that not all teachers cared about their lives and their learning. The participants attributed that, in part, to the large number of students the teachers in the traditional environment served. They also felt that many teachers were just there for a paycheck and did not enjoy teaching children. Many of the students had negative experiences with retention in both elementary and secondary grades. A lack of success was caused by transiency, academic failure, and other influences outside of school. Transiency causes significant issues due to states having different graduation requirements. Experiences with retention, transiency, and teacher relationships also contributed to students' lack of motivation and a loss of hope for attaining a diploma.

In the nontraditional environment, students perceive that they have better, more supportive relationships with their teachers; are learning more than in the traditional environment; and, due to the self-pacing component, have the motivation and hope needed to successfully attain a diploma. Supportive relationships with teachers helped students feel connected to the school, and the support they received from their teachers encouraged them to work hard to be successful. The expectations students perceive teachers have for them serve as motivation and provide hope that students can reach graduation.

Participants had varied responses when asked how they perceived the level of instructional rigor of the software-based programs as compared to instructional rigor of the traditional classroom and its ability to increase engagement in learning. Some students indicated that the program was easier because it was more organized and students knew what was expected of them. They also shared that the program let them know how much they had to complete to finish a course. Other students felt that the content in the software program was harder because the courses were more difficult. Whether they indicated that the program was easier or harder, all students felt that they were learning more than they had in the traditional school environment. Students in the alternative credit recovery programs were required to pass the subtests of the state graduation exam to receive a diploma.

The role and relationship of the teachers in alternative education credit recovery programs were also seen as significant to students. Students shared that they believed the support provided by their teachers helped them to be successful and reach graduation. The teachers in the program seemed to play a vital role in the motivation of students to persist in the program and also helped to provide the hope they needed to see graduation as possible.

Outcomes Related to School Completion and Graduation Rates

Overall, students who participated in alternative education credit recovery programs felt they would not have graduated had they not been able to enroll in the programs. Lack of academic success and other factors that pushed them to consider dropping out were mitigated once they were involved in their respective programs. Having supportive adults who held high expectations for each student and having access to a self-paced software program that provided adequate rigor led the students who were involved in these programs to obtain a diploma. If these students had been unable to participate in the programs provided by their districts, they would not have graduated with their grade-level peers, if they graduated at all.

Current Status of Project

While the project itself is not ongoing, the programs identified in the study are still in operation. Additional research is being conducted on ways to keep students in school and address their individual needs.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

For this project, I was the researcher. However, in my roles as a curriculum specialist, professional development director, and assistant principal, I was charged with developing and implementing alternative education credit recovery programs.

Lessons Learned

The decision to drop out of high school is influenced by many factors and those factors begin having an effect in the early years of schooling. The support of caring adults serves as encouragement and provides hope to students who, otherwise, might leave school without obtaining a diploma. Self-paced credit recovery programs also provide motivation and hope, as students are able to see their progress and take ownership of their learning. Students who participated in alternative education credit recovery programs felt they would not have graduated had they not been able to enroll in the programs

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

Implications for Practice

Teachers and administrators could benefit from a deeper understanding of insights gained from this study. The following professional learning opportunities are recommended for teachers and administrators.

- Student roles outside of school:
Students often have lives outside of school that force them to function as the adults in their homes. They take on responsibilities often seen as those of the parent. Teachers and administrators need to develop processes and structures within the school that support students who struggle to balance those adult roles at home with the teenage roles they have at school.
- Building relationships with *all* students:
Teachers and administrators often have difficulty forming relationships with students who fall outside of what is considered the norm for most teenagers. It is important to reserve judgment and find ways to reach and connect with all students, no matter their backgrounds or home experiences.
- Teacher expectations:
Many teachers hold dual sets of expectations for students based on factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and prior academic success. Teachers should set high expectations for all students, including that of attaining a diploma that prepares them for life and college. Instruction should be designed not only to meet students where they are, but also to raise them to the grade level standards that prepare them to be successful in school. Teachers sometimes fail to realize the power they wield in determining the life-course for students. It is imperative that teachers and administrators prepare all students to be successful after high schools and help them to reach the goals they set for themselves, not the goals set by teachers alone.

In addition to professional development, there are other implications for school practice to be considered as a result of this study.

Schools should examine promotion retention policies, especially in the early grades. School and district policies related to retention in early grades are often, by design, detrimental to student success. If policies allow for students to be retained more than one time before reaching high school, it is almost guaranteed that a student will not reach graduation. Most state attendance policies have a maximum age of attendance set at 19 years of age. Students who are retained twice before reaching high school will age out before reaching graduation.

Schools should examine the structures, processes, and supports that are in place to help at-risk students. Administrators and teachers should examine the structures, processes, and supports that are in place at the school level to help students meet their goals and be academically successful. Often times, those things that are in place meet the needs of the adults in the building, not the needs of the students. Opportunities like afterschool tutoring, for example, are not an option for students who rely on school transportation, and this is just one example of a support that does not meet the needs of the students who need them most. Teachers and administrators must constantly examine what is in place to help students and determine if it is actually helping its targeted population.

Schools should provide learning opportunities that allow students to move at an accelerated pace if they are behind their grade-level peers. Many students fall behind due to factors outside of their control or due to bad choices. Falling behind in school should not result in a student losing the opportunity to earn a diploma. When students lose credits in a transfer or due to factors outside of the school, schools should provide a means for them to catch back up, if the students are willing to do so.

Implications for Policy

The following implications for policy emerged as a result of this study:

- School districts should examine program accessibility for students who fall behind earlier in high school. Successful interventions take place as soon as students begin to struggle. Instead of waiting one or two years to provide an intervention program for students who fail to earn credits, districts should have programs in place during the school year and summer to help students earn back those credits in a more timely manner.
- Schools districts should examine discipline and attendance policies that keep students out of school. Punitive policies such as those related to suspension and loss of credit due to absences should be closely examined for their effectiveness. Because we know that students need to be in attendance to learn, it is important that districts provide access to learning if possible.