Foreword and Executive Summary

By Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli

Last May, *Slate* ran an eight-part series exploring the rise in online learning for high school students who had failed a course.[1] One of the articles included a screenshot of this tweet with identifying information removed: "If anyone wants to go online and do my chemistry credit recovery, I'd be more than happy to give you my username and password."

Ouch. Teenage bravado, perhaps, but it illustrates our worst fears about credit recovery.

For the uninitiated, that's the practice of enabling high-school students to retrieve credits from courses that they either failed or failed to complete. And it's at the crossroads of two big trends in education.

The first is the desire to move toward "competency based" education. Rather than make all pupils march through a prescribed curriculum on a one-size-fits-all timeline, this approach allows them to move at their own pace, earning a credential by demonstrating what they know and can do, not because they accumulated a fixed number of hours in their classroom seats.

The other trend is the push to dramatically boost graduation rates. That started with a No Child Left Behind regulation under former U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, mandating that states measure graduation rates in a standardized way, that they strive toward challenging goals for boosting said rates, and that they hold high schools accountable for not attaining those goals.

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It worked, sort of. On-time high-school graduation rates rose from 79 percent in 2011 to 84 percent in 2016—yet there's little evidence that students are learning more as a result. A key question is whether these rising rates indicate real educational progress—or games and chicanery. Clearly, credit recovery has played a part in the increase, as it was explicitly developed to help credit-deficient high school students complete all their course requirements. What we don't know is whether the credits thus obtained are the fruit of high-quality alternative courses that expect students to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills of the original courses—or are vacuous imitations, a sort of educational fakery.

Anecdotal evidence offers ample cause for concern. The high-profile 2017 investigation into Washington, D.C.,'s Ballou High School is perhaps the most vivid example. Investigators found that most students graduated despite sky-high absenteeism rates and widespread use of credit-recovery courses. But the problem is not restricted to one school in the nation's capital. Similar concerns about credit recovery have been raised in multiple states, including California, North Carolina, New York, and Virginia.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states must still factor graduation rates into their high school accountability plans. So the federal incentive to game the statistic remains, which underscores the need to keep it from turning into a total end run around actual learning.

Unfortunately, reliable data are non-existent when it comes to how states and districts define credit recovery programs, much less when it comes to gauging their quality. That data drought received a welcome sprinkle of rain when, for the first time, the Office for Civil Rights released data in 2018 on whether individual schools offered credit-recovery programs and how many students were enrolled in them.

These new data, though humble in scope, allow us to report credit recovery participation rates at the national, state, and local levels—and provide a baseline by which future participation can be compared. Fordham's Associate Director of Research Adam Tyner and Research Associate Nicholas Munyan-Penney were keen to delve into the new data and are the co-authors of our study.

They sought to answer three questions:

1. How many high schools have active credit recovery programs, and are some types of schools more likely than others to have them?
2. How many students are enrolled in credit recovery?
3. To what extent do schools enroll *large shares* of their students in credit recovery, and is that more common in certain types of schools?

For each school, Tyner and Munyan-Penney merged the OCR program and student participation data from 2015–2016 with same-year enrollment and demographic data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). They included traditional district-operated schools as well as charters and magnet schools.[2]

Their analysis yielded five key findings.

Finding 1: Most high schools have credit recovery programs, although these are far less common in charter schools.

A large majority (72.4 percent) of U.S. public high schools report having credit recovery programs. Of these, almost all (94.6 percent) report enrolling at least one student in such a program, meaning that 68.6 percent of high schools have an "active" CR program.

Yet charter schools are much less likely to have the programs: 69.7 percent of traditional public schools, 69.7 percent of Title I schools, and 69.0 percent of magnet schools have active CR programs, but that's true of less than half (47.4 percent) of charter schools.

Finding 2: While the presence of credit recovery programs is generally not related to school poverty levels, schools with many minority students are slightly more likely to have active programs.

Schools with more of their students in poverty (as measured by free-and-reduced-price-lunch (FRL) eligibility) are generally no more likely to have active CR programs than schools with fewer students in poverty.

However, schools with large shares of minority students are *slightly* more likely to have CR programs. Specifically, schools with 75 percent minority students are 2 percentage points likelier to have an active CR program than those with 25 percent minority students.

Finding 3: Credit recovery programs are less common in smaller schools.

Smaller high schools—those with fewer than 1,250 students—are much less likely to have CR programs than larger ones. In fact, the likelihood of having an active program climbs steadily as enrollment rises to 1,250 students.

Finding 4: In high schools with active credit recovery programs, an average of 8 percent of students participate. However, nearly one in ten schools enrolls 20 percent or more of its students.

In the 8,573 high schools with active programs, 8.1 percent of students are enrolled in at least one CR course. But nearly one in ten (9.1 percent) of the schools with an active CR program enrolls at least 20 percent of its students. Fewer schools (1.6 percent) enroll at least 40 percent of their students in CR, and just 0.7 percent of schools enroll at least 60 percent.

Finding 5: Higher enrollment in credit recovery is more common in large and urban schools, as well as in charter schools and schools with higher proportions of poor and minority students.

Although urbanicity, poverty level, and the racial makeup of schools are not strongly associated with having a CR program, that's not the case when we look at location.

Specifically, schools located in cities are much more likely to enroll high percentages of their students in CR than schools located in other areas. Among high schools in cities, 16.9 percent enroll at least 20 percent of their students in CR, which is more than double that of schools in towns (7.7 percent), suburbs (7.3 percent), and rural areas (6.2 percent).

As indicated, charter schools are less likely than other schools to have CR programs in the first place, perhaps because they tend to be smaller. But when they do offer CR, they are much more likely to enroll greater shares of their students than are traditional public or magnet schools. In addition, larger schools as well as schools with higher shares of students in poverty and higher shares of minority students enroll more of their students in CR.

At the state level, the greatest shares of students enrolled in CR are found in Rhode Island, Nevada, New Mexico, District of Columbia, and California, while the smallest shares are found in Florida, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Alaska. Thirteen of the forty-five largest districts enroll more than 8.1 percent of their students in such schools, which is the national school-wide average.[3]

We derive four takeaways from these findings.

First, adopt the old adage of trust but verify. Credit recovery programs are so varied and uneven that it's wise to view them with skepticism. Until we have better data than are presently available, we shouldn't assume that they're of high quality, absent closer inspection. Frankly it's suspicious that higher enrollment in CR is more common in urban schools and in schools with higher proportions of poor and minority students, given that these are often the same schools where graduation rates have risen the fastest.

That said, don't assume that all forms of CR are fraudulent. It's premature to make sweeping generalizations about the value and efficacy of these programs. Like most educational interventions, we can find places that are experiencing genuine success as a result of the intervention, but we can also find places that manifest dismal failure.

On that note, **the second takeaway is target the outliers**. Districts and schools (both traditional and charter) with higher rates of students participating in credit recovery warrant scrutiny. We name some of those districts in this report. When they have nearly half or more of their students enrolled in credit recovery, it is past time to wave a cautionary flag. Automatic audits should be triggered by such rates because the potential to abuse this kind of programs is high—and highest when there's no external evidence.

As American Enterprise Institute's Nat Malkus observes in a recent report on credit recovery, "the unbridled access and high participation rates found in some schools are the circumstances in which these programs can become a second *track* to graduation, not just a second chance."[4] We need to do more to prevent that from happening.

Third, adopt the recommendations put forth by this report's authors. That includes collecting additional data about credit recovery programs at the federal and state levels, such as whether courses are taken in person or online and the name of the curriculum or software program used; adopting formal state guidelines for credit recovery programs, especially as they pertain to eligibility and vetting of courses; and using external assessments to hold students and schools accountable. We're particularly enthusiastic about the latter, which would go a long way toward making credit recovery a form of competency-based education; it's hard to say that about it today.

Fourth, in the absence of an external check on quality, adopt the ounce of prevention rule. Stipulate, as some states already do, that students must have previously failed the course to be eligible for credit recovery. Or do as Alabama and Tennessee have done and demand that students achieve a minimum score in the original course so that they aren't starting from scratch with new material. If they don't reach that minimum, require them to retake the traditional course to earn credit.

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Having more than one way to demonstrate mastery of content in high school is laudable, especially because students' distinctive needs require greater personalization. But these promising methods must be executed with more than good intentions. That means making certain that credit recovery meets our expectations for quality, including using external assessments to ensure comparability and rigor, and cracking down on schools that appear to be over-relying on it. In other words, erect sufficient safeguards to protect students from misuse.

Otherwise, the incentives to propel unprepared adolescents towards graduation will outweigh those that advance the challenging but noble work of sufficiently educating them.