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RESEARCH BRIEF 7

Online Credit Recovery: Evolution of an Implementation Model

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About This Research Brief

In partnership with the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) launched a study of online credit recovery during the 2017–18 school year. The study focused on students who failed Algebra 1 or ninth-grade English (English 9) during their first year of high school and retook the course in one of the study’s credit recovery classes during the summer before their second year of high school. This research brief is the seventh in [a series of briefs](#) for the *Online Credit Recovery Study*.¹

The first brief provided an overview of the study and described the credit recovery model tested. The next two briefs described implementation and initial outcomes for the Algebra 1 and English 9 credit recovery courses. Brief 4 provided information about the differences in resources and costs between fully online and teacher-directed blended credit recovery courses.

The fifth brief summarized lessons learned about implementing online credit recovery from the teacher perspective, and the sixth brief described different student patterns of engagement with the online program content.

This brief describes how LAUSD’s approach to online courses evolved in response to preliminary findings from the study. In response to the study, the district’s implementation model and supporting professional development (PD) shifted from the technical aspects of using online courses to include guidance on how to strategically select digital tools and resources and support teachers in becoming the architects of course content. The motivation for this evolution was a desire to transform courses from a rigid online experience to one where the teacher has a more active role in blending online and in-person instructional experiences to better serve student needs.

Key Findings

- Partnerships between districts and researchers provide valuable information about how a district’s approach to online credit recovery is implemented. Continued partnerships can promote a continuous quality improvement approach to improve on online instructional models.
- Teachers need both explicit guidance and professional development to help them incorporate instructional support and blended instruction into online credit recovery courses, including ways to support student socioemotional needs in credit recovery classes.

Study Overview

The *Online Credit Recovery Study* examined an online credit recovery model in which the program vendor supplied the main course content and curriculum, and the school provided the appropriate California subject-credentialed teacher who could offer individualized support and supplemental instruction. The study compared online credit recovery classes to those conducted in a traditional teacher-directed setting. All classes took place in standard comprehensive high schools in LAUSD during the district's 5-week summer term learning program.

The Online Credit Recovery Study

Building on LAUSD's experience in working with AIR as an external evaluator for a previous technology initiative, the district reached out to AIR in spring 2016 to collaborate on a grant proposal for external funding to study the effectiveness of online credit recovery.

The grant was awarded in summer 2017, and the first cohort of schools participating in the study offered online and teacher-directed English 9 credit recovery classes in summer 2018. Subsequent study cohorts implemented credit recovery classes during the 2018–19 school year and summer 2019 for both Algebra 1 and English 9.

District Context Leading Up to the Study

LAUSD is the second largest public school district in the United States. With boundaries spanning 710 square miles and more than 650,000 students enrolled, the district serves a diverse student population encompassing multiple racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic populations and a wide range of academic needs.

With the beginning of the Common Core Technology Project in 2013, the district began a centralized effort to enhance technical infrastructure (e.g., installing wireless access points). This initiative expanded access to technology devices and increased the use of digital tools for students to engage in 21st century learning to ultimately support college and career readiness. The 2015–16 school year marked the beginning of the district's first large-scale and coordinated implementation of online courses, reflecting the growing trend among K–12 districts and postsecondary institutions across the country. Although online courses can provide opportunities to earn original credit, such courses also expand the array of credit recovery programs offered in district high schools.²

Understanding the potential of a blended learning experience came at a time of change in LAUSD. More schools started to provide 1:1 technology and expand educator awareness of digital applications and programs. At the same time, the district increased use of the Schoology learning management system at all grade levels, advancing teachers' familiarity with designing online assignments and tests and responding to these with online feedback.

In a broad conceptual shift, the district also adopted learning targets in academic content areas in tandem with embracing mastery learning and grading principles at this time. Thus, educators experienced a convergence of new elements: access to technology, growing interest to implement digital lessons, knowledge of the positive benefits to all learners, and a desire for more support.

Initial Implementation Model for Online Courses

The study was set up to test a model where students receive the bulk of their instruction through the online course, and teachers support students with specific topics as needed. For example, if a student struggles with a quiz or a test, teachers should review the missed questions, provide intervention, and add additional assessment attempts. During class, teachers were expected to monitor the online program's dashboard to identify areas where students needed support. Yet, simultaneously, permissions to edit online course options and customize course content in the platform were the realm of only site administrators.

The approach to PD at the time reflected this implementation model. The vendor's PD centered on specific operations of how to use the digital tools and online content. PD sessions focused on navigating the platform, building awareness of the lessons, and preparing teachers to facilitate the online courses. Teachers gained tools and strategies on how to coach students who were struggling with the online content and help students spend enough time to successfully complete the course. Teachers also learned to use the vendor's dashboard with its various progress monitoring and metrics functions.

Preliminary Teacher Survey Findings From the *Online Credit Recovery Study*

To give LAUSD timely feedback on the implementation and performance of the online credit recovery classes, AIR conducted a preliminary analysis of the English 9 teacher survey data collected from the first summer cohort (2018). AIR presented the findings from that analysis to LAUSD in fall 2018. Those preliminary findings suggested the following:

- Most teachers said the online curriculum materials were high quality (86%), and the PD they received helped them implement the technology in class (81%).
- However, fewer teachers said the PD familiarized them with approaches to personalized instruction for students who fall behind (62%) or was useful for improving their overall instruction (62%).
- Furthermore, less than half of the teachers (48%) said that the online curriculum addressed the learning needs of all students.

The preliminary findings also indicated that a majority of the teachers implementing the online classes relied on grades generated by the online platform to determine students' final course grades rather than using their own criteria to determine grades. At these early stages, they were not integrating their own lessons and activities, which could have factored into the grading process. Meanwhile, teachers in the teacher-directed classes were more likely to consider elements such as attendance or effort, besides homework and performance on tests and quizzes, when determining student grades.

Encouraging More Individualized Support for Students

Based on the study's preliminary findings, LAUSD made improvements to the online learning implementation model. The district encouraged teachers to design lessons that can supplement the online program curriculum and better meet the needs of individual students. Updated guidance, along with additional access permissions in the online platform, allowed teachers to make instructional decisions about how students can progress toward demonstrating mastery of content standards.

Alongside updates to district guidance supporting teacher customization of online courses, the district worked with the vendor to redesign the teacher PD to promote more blended instruction. The district expanded the PD to include tools for personalizing and integrating additional resources, rather than just learning the logistics of the platform. In addition, the district's PD for teachers included training for blended learning to help teachers direct learning experiences that meet students' needs.

LAUSD rolled out some of the guidance and revised PD for teachers in the second summer cohort of the *Online Credit Recovery Study*. In postsession evaluations, teachers who participated in these new PD sessions reported that they felt more prepared and appreciated the flexibility of the online courses. Comments from teachers captured a readiness "to implement online courses in my classroom through stations or as an extra resource," for "helping my struggling students," and "to fill holes in prior knowledge." In addition, there was a small uptick in teacher satisfaction as reported on the study's end-of-course teacher survey. For example, the percentage of teachers who agreed that the PD familiarized them with approaches to personalize instruction for students who fell behind increased from 62% in 2018 to 70% in 2019.

Moving to a More Blended Implementation Model

As the study concluded, LAUSD continued to revise its approach to online learning to facilitate a more blended instructional model throughout the district. These revisions included a new layered PD approach to meet the needs of new and experienced practitioners. In addition to platform-specific PD, on-demand trainings were developed to promote a more blended-learning instructional environment and help teachers integrate the vendor's online content into their credit recovery instruction. In particular, the trainings were designed to include the following key features:

- Highlight successful models such as station rotation, flex, and flipped classrooms.
- Engage participants in real-world scenarios of combining online instruction with teacher-directed lessons.
- Model blended learning practices that replicate effective classroom instruction.

The goal of these changes in PD and the online course opportunities is to transform teachers' role into that of "learning architects." In the blended model, teachers have the opportunity to optimize experiences for their students by determining which lessons are most effectively completed in the platform and which can be completed with personalized assignments and projects. With a greater understanding that digital content and tools are adaptable, mesh with other applications, and are customizable to meet a variety of needs, teachers can be more open to change and more confident in their professional abilities.

Online Course Models

Although the study focused on a particular online credit recovery model, LAUSD offers additional models of implementation:

- **Blended courses** combine face-to-face instruction with online digital content. The LAUSD subject-credentialed teacher plans and facilitates instruction, using both digital content and face-to-face delivery of their own lessons to personalize and differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students. The teacher uses the online reporting tools to identify student needs and monitor student progress, adjusting instruction between face-to-face and online plus whole-class, small-group, and individual direct instruction. A school-site coordinator oversees implementation and serves as the point of contact for the school's blended-learning program.
- **Virtual courses** are online courses with instruction delivered by a California subject-credentialed teacher provided by the vendor. The school provides a certificated staff member to mentor students, monitor progress, and serve as a point of contact between the virtual teacher and the school site. The mentor teacher does not provide direct instruction or assign supplemental lessons. Virtual courses provide schedule flexibility for students because courses may be taken during the school day, before/after school, Saturdays, or independently at home.
- **Prescriptive versions** are available for some virtual and blended courses. These courses contain the same content as the original version but have a "test-out" feature built into the platform. Using this mastery-based model, students can complete a course at their own pace. Students take the pretests for each lesson. If they demonstrate proficiency by scoring 70% or higher on the pretest, students can skip to the next lesson. Prescriptive courses are available only as a credit recovery option for students who are repeating a course.

Implications

The *Online Credit Recovery Study* took place at a time of growing understanding of the potential of online learning in LAUSD. Participation in and learning from the study greatly enhanced LAUSD's later integration of digital tools and blended instruction. This experience exemplifies the utility of partnerships between researchers and practitioners.

Although the collaboration between LAUSD and AIR for this study was more targeted in scope than a formal research-practice partnership, it shared some features desired in such partnerships.³ First, the collaboration started from a district-identified issue, with research priorities driven by district needs. Second, LAUSD and AIR sustained interaction throughout the study to learn from each other. These interactions helped AIR understand how the study fit within the district's broader instructional strategy and the context in which district schools implemented the study classes. The interactions also helped district leaders understand how district policies and expectations were interpreted and implemented within their schools. Together, these two features fostered policy-relevant research that could inform district practice.

In March 2020, with the unanticipated switch to distance learning brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, the district tapped into its experience with online credit recovery to support integrating online instruction more broadly across the district. Some teachers who had participated in the study even communicated greater ease in transitioning to fully online instruction in spring 2020. As expressed in email communications to the vendor's coaches, LAUSD teachers were more able to pivot to online teaching and continued to seek enhancements for their new virtual classrooms.

As school districts across the nation face decisions about if and how to expand their use of online courses in the wake of the pandemic, there will be a continuing need to examine the effectiveness of traditional teacher-directed and blended instructional models, and research partners have a valuable role to play in examining evidence and highlighting best practices. Engaging together in this study provided usable, relevant, and timely research to inform decision making. Continued partnerships between researchers and practitioners will help further improve online instructional models and best practices for effectively implementing those models.

Notes

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² Online courses for original credit can benefit students who want to access courses not offered at their school sites, in situations where a lack of student numbers precluded offering the class (such as Advanced Placement courses), and for students with scheduling conflicts.

³ See Coburn et al. (2013) for a description of research-practice partnerships. In this paper, the authors describe five features of research-practice partnerships: (a) long-term working collaboration, (b) a focus on problems of practice, (c) a commitment to sustained interaction that benefits both researchers and practitioners, (d) using intentional strategies to foster partnership, and (e) producing original analyses of data to answer research questions posed by the district. [Coburn, C. E., Penuel, W. R., & Geil, K. E. (2013). *Research-practice partnerships: A strategy for leveraging research for educational improvement in school districts*. William T. Grant Foundation. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED568396.pdf>]



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