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Over-Age, Under-Credited Students

AT A GLANCE

Over six million individuals have left high school prior to graduation in the United States. A large proportion of these non-graduates did not obtain the required number of class credits for their age or grade level and became disengaged with the process. School districts have identified this as a real issue and recognize the great impact that low graduation rates have on individuals and the greater community. Students who represent non-white races and ethnicities and those who come from lower income households tend to have a greater chance of becoming an over-age, under-credited student. An overview of this student sub-group and a summary of recent empirical findings pertaining to the most frequently used educational strategies are provided in this research capsule.

Over-Age and Under-Credited Students

Over-age and under-credited (OU) students are typically defined as not having the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade. Generally speaking, these students have struggled in traditional academic settings and oftentimes decide to leave school prematurely. Even high school dropouts who have left school for reasons unrelated to academic challenges are considered OU because they stop accumulating credits toward graduation immediately upon their departure (Powell et al. 2015).

Several over-age, under-credited youth go on to become one of the estimated 6.7 million 16-24 year old high school dropouts in the United States (Rath et al., 2012). Students who fail to complete high school have a negative impact on the economy. These dropouts place a burden on society and the individual taxpayer, from higher rates of incarceration to increased health costs (Rath et al., 2012). The approximately 6.7 million young people in the United States who have left high school without a diploma and are no longer enrolled in school are predominantly male and minority. They represent approximately 9% of all

youth in the United States (Rath, 2012; Viano, 2017; Civic Enterprise, 2018). If youth that have completed some education, but are not currently enrolled in school or working are also considered, this number rises to 17% of 16-24 year olds. These disconnected young people can be divided into two groups: chronic youth and under-attached youth.

Chronic youth have not enrolled in school or secured a job after the age of 16, while under-attached youth may have completed high school or some education and work experience, but have not entered college or secured steady employment. Many of these chronic and under-attached students have been exposed to difficult life circumstances, been unsuccessful in finding work, hold a caregiver role in their family, or are involved in the criminal justice system. Additionally, students typically have mental or physical health conditions that serve as major obstacles to their success. Due to these circumstances, many of these students quite often spend years struggling in school before dropping out or failing to pursue post-secondary education (Rath et. al, 2012).

Prior Research

While the literature regarding best practices for serving youth who are not on track to graduate from high school is fairly abundant, the evidence from rigorous evaluation studies remains limited (Malkus, 2018). However, the following section provides research summaries of various online/in-person credit recovery programs, along with results of differing credit recovery initiatives.

Online and In-Person Credit Recovery Programs

Many high schools use online courses to allow students to retake failed classes in an effort to help get students back on track and graduate. However, there is limited evidence available on the effectiveness of online credit recovery in improving students' long-term outcomes compared with traditional face-to-face credit recovery courses. The following summaries present findings that have been discovered from both online and in-person credit recovery courses.

The Back on Track Study, conducted by American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (2016) examined long term outcomes for 1,224 Chicago Public ninth graders who failed Algebra I and were randomly assigned to an online or face-to-face algebra credit recovery course (Rickles et. al, 2018). In particular, they looked at math credits earned through four years of high school and rates of on-time graduation. Researchers followed the students for three years after the summer credit recovery course to assess outcomes. They found no statistically significant differences in longer term outcomes between students in the online and face-to-face courses. Researchers also concluded that it may be unrealistic to expect a single credit recovery course, online or in person, to place failing students back on track for graduation. Since students enrolled in the study's credit recovery course were more likely to enter high school with low mathematics and reading scores, have higher absenteeism, and fail multiple courses during their ninth-grade year, they likely required the use of multiple school engagement techniques beyond specific math credits or subject knowledge.

Levine (2017) and colleagues released a report describing MassGrad online credit recovery programs in 24 Massachusetts high schools. They acknowledged the potential benefits online learning may offer students who need to recover course credit such as including course access outside of the regular school day or covering only material they failed previously. However, researchers also noted the wide array of socio-

emotional, behavioral, and academic supports students with prior academic struggles need to be successful (Levine et al., 2017). The study used a quasi-experimental design to compare students who participated in the online credit recovery program to those who participated in a traditional recovery program. Results indicated that online students were more likely to graduate two years after participation, but not one year or during the final year. This may indicate that recovering credits in earlier grades might have increased engagement levels. Additionally, drop-out rates for online students decreased during the students' final year of participation, but not one or two years after the intervention. This may suggest that the online strategy may be more effective when students are enrolled in school. Lastly, online students were less likely to enroll in college the year after graduation and had lower scores on the student's math and science exams compared to students who participated in a face-to-face credit recovery program (Levine et al 2017).

The U.S. Department of Education sponsored National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (2018) looked at the extent to which credit recovery courses were used and found that in 2014-2015, 89% of high schools nationwide offered at least one credit recovery course. High graduation rate schools (90% and higher) were more likely to offer credit recovery than low-graduation rate high schools (67% and below). Through their research, they identified that the field knew how widely they were used, but had little understanding of the effectiveness. They found several studies with inconclusive or blurred results. Heppen et al's study (2016) in particular found that although credit recovery courses allowed students to recover credits, the level of knowledge gained, was likely minimal (Civic Enterprises, 2018).

Viana and Henry's (2018) study found that credit recovery leads to a higher likelihood of graduating from high school and a lower likelihood of dropping out of high school compared to students who fail courses and repeat courses for credit. The data for this study include all students in North Carolina Public Schools who were first-time ninth graders in either the 2012-2013 or 2013-2014 school years who failed at least one required course while in high school. Students were tracked longitudinally up to five years after they entered high school. Since credit recovery is an intervention to address course failure, the treatment group is defined as students who enroll in credit recovery and the comparison are students who fail courses but repeat courses traditionally. Findings indicate credit recovery students are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to drop out than students who repeat courses traditionally. However, credit recovery appeared to reduce student learning as measured by the ACT composite score and, in robustness checks, the end of course exams in Math, English, and Biology.

Frazelle (2016) examined common strategies used by six Montana schools that had high student passing rates in online credit recovery courses offered by the Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) in the 2013-2014 school year. MTDA is a tuition-free resource funded by the Montana State Legislature that provides an online platform and course curricula, but each school is allowed to determine its own structure for delivering the courses. Frazelle's research uncovered that top performing schools (over 60% passing rates) in the MTDA credit recovery program had four key elements: (1) Establish consistent program structure: created a specific time and place for students to take online credit recovery courses within normal school hours, funded a certified teacher to run the program, fostered schoolwide support for the MTDA program, and secured external funding sources when necessary; (2) Provide instruction support: created an active learning environment through goal setting, offered tutoring, identified academic support within the building, encouraged students to talk to the MTDA online instructors, promoted staff responsibility for student outcomes, and removed barriers to student success; (3) Build relationships and establish open

communication across the program: by providing consistent encouragement and mentoring to students and maintaining open communications with MTDA staff; and (4) Develop data tools to monitor and communicate student progress: such as additional tracking and monitoring tool to supplement the data dashboard (Frazelle, 2016).

The Putnam County Schools Virtual Institution to Accentuate Learning (VITAL) program works with classroom teachers to use formative assessments by intervening when students fall behind and not just after the student has failed. VITAL combines an online “originating teacher” with an onsite facilitating teacher who is an active participant in the student learning experience. VITAL has saved or recovered more than 300 course credits. This has played a key role in increasing one of Putnam’s High School’s graduation rate from 86% to 94% and the district’s rate from 86% to 93% between 2008 and 2014 (Powell et. all, 2015).

Jennifer Darling-Aduana and colleagues (2018) completed a case study of critical issues regarding online credit recovery programs in America’s schools. Their study suggested the following methods for district staff, vendors, school leaders, classroom instructors, and students to improve online instructional programs.

- Define clear priorities. Is the program focused primarily on helping students recover credits? Anytime, anywhere access to courses could support this goal. Alternatively, if student learning is the primary focus, educational leaders might encourage active and authentic student engagement. Darling-Aduana’s research suggests that learning is enhanced by integrating online and in-person interactions. This requires teachers with expertise in course content, as well as the ability to deal with technical issues in online platforms.
- Be clear about additional goals. Beyond academic goals for online courses, teachers may have other objectives such as providing a welcoming instructional space for students who are at-risk of dropping out and would not otherwise be in school. Clarity about multiple goals can help teachers set expectations and strategies.
- Develop competencies classroom staff need to support students working online. Program administrators and professional programs should help teachers develop general technical skills and provide targeted training about navigating specific software platforms. Teachers in credit recovery programs also need training to meet the social and emotional needs of students and manage classrooms using online tools. Even in programs where instructional content is delivered entirely online, access to a knowledgeable instructor may facilitate targeted assistance and deeper learning.

Georgia Credit Recovery (2020) developed the following best practice ideas to help school systems implement effective credit recovery programs.

- Establish a minimum score to enter credit recovery programs: Students attempting credit recovery courses are more successful when they have a foundation of information in the subject area. Consider students who earned a 60 or higher on their first attempt at the course as the best candidates for credit recovery.

- Provide academic support at the local school: Credit recovery is a tool for school systems to use. While site coordinators are required to proctor tests for students, it may be beneficial to provide additional academic support for students. Providing access to highly qualified teachers while they complete the program will enhance the student's ability to succeed.
- Hold students accountable for program completion: Although students have the ability to work on credit recovery courses anytime, anywhere, school systems that require students to attend afternoon sessions or who require students to "report in" on a regular basis, have increased success rates with the credit recovery program.
- Set Participation Guidelines: Require students to log-in within ten days of enrollment and notify students they have twenty-six weeks to complete a course. School systems that set more definitive time periods (e.g. six-week session) or those that have a published end date (e.g. two weeks before the school semester ends) have better student success and completion rates.
(<http://www.gacreditrecovery.org/Guidelines/BestPractices.aspx>)

Other Credit Recovery Initiatives

Numerous school districts have also implemented strategies to work with OU students other than traditional online or in-person credit recovery programs. The following summaries provide examples of alternative models and strategies.

Metis Associates (2015) conducted an evaluation of the Good Shepherd Services Transfer School Model to determine its effectiveness at increasing graduation rates among overage and under-credited students. The Good Shepherd model is grounded in developmental theory positing that social and emotional factors are essential to academic learning and achievement. Therefore, each student receives personalized support to build on individual strengths. Metis used a rigorous quasi-experimental design, in which outcomes for Good Shepherd students were compared to outcomes for equivalent comparison groups selected using Propensity Score Matching (PSM). The evaluators determined that students in the Good Shepherd Transfer Schools had a significantly higher chance of graduating. The Good Shepherd Services Transfer School Model also produced significantly better attendance and credit accumulation outcomes. Good Shepherd students were more likely to graduate, outperforming comparison students by 12 percentage points. These students also had a significantly higher average rate of school attendance, outperforming comparison students by 5.4 percentage points – equivalent to nearly 10 school days per year.

Spokane Public Schools Homeless Education and Resource Team (HEART) levered its extensive data tracking to develop (real-time information on assessment scores, course completion rates, absenteeism, discipline rates) and assign a new position – the Homeless Community Specialist. This person provided highly engaged support for students experiencing homelessness and their families, along with the Check & Connect mentoring program (only dropout prevention program reviewed by the US Department of Education). Research results indicated that this strategy has strong evidence of positive effects on school attendance. The specialists work each day with students to set goals, identifying incremental steps toward the goals, putting in the work and commitment needed to obtain each goal and celebrating goal achievement (Civic Enterprises, 2018).

Competency-Based Education (CBE) strategies are often used to address the needs of at-risk youth by providing students more flexible credit accrual and recovery options based on demonstrated mastery of knowledge and skills, alternative pacing through courses, and personalized instruction and assessment (Tomasello, 2016). According to researchers, CBE is a promising strategy for addressing the needs of at-risk youth because it: (1) increases the likelihood of graduation for students at risk of dropping or aging out by offering an alternative, self-paced system of instruction for reaching graduation; (2) ensures mastery of specific skills, as opposed to completed courses, that are directly related to skill sets necessary to make a successful transition to postsecondary education and work; (3) addresses issues related to student motivation by providing measurable learning objectives that are directly related to skills assessed through formative assessments; and (4) provides an alternative to repeating full courses for students who are behind in their education (Tomasello, 2016).

The Berkeley County School District's (BCSD) Star Academy is a magnet program that operates as a school within a school inside Berkeley High School in Moncks Corner, South Carolina (Bryant, 2016). The purpose of this magnet program is to allow up to eighty overage eighth graders the opportunity to complete their eighth and ninth grade curriculums in one academic year. These academically at-risk students that are off grade level are more likely to drop out of school due to absenteeism, lack of family involvement, poor behavior, and failing academics. To best support these students, the Star Academy used the school within a school model to create a culture specifically designed for their needs. While they are still considered eighth graders for the majority of the school year, the students were still located on a high school campus that allowed them the opportunity to begin integrating themselves in a more mature population rather than the middle schools they had attended before. The Star Academy staff in BCSD consists of four core academic teachers, a guidance counselor, and a director. Once students are accepted into the program, the Star Academy staff stays in contact with all families, differentiate instruction, research colleges and careers with students, implement character education, and celebrate good behavior and grades. In the past five years, 1,521 ninth grade credits (86%) out of 1,766 have been earned. Additionally, 81% of the students that have finished the Star Academy and high school have graduated on time (Bryant, 2016).

Summary

As the research suggests, a great need for quality credit recovery programs or preventive assistance for overage, under-credited students exists in school districts across the country. It is an issue that not only impacts student's short-term success, but also their long-term quality of life and their ability to successfully contribute to society. Northeastern University found that each high school dropout costs taxpayers approximately \$292,000 through the course of their lives. Although previous studies have often produced conflicting results, many researchers appear to support the need to address several issues such as social and emotional deficiencies, school attendance, relationship building, and developing an early warning system so that struggling students may be identified and re-engaged before they drop-out of school. Additionally, programs and services that provide a one-to-one relationship between the student and recovery credit teacher or coach, have proven to be consistently effective. Research has shown that high social and emotional competency, often developed through relationships, is positively associated with increased high school grades rates (Civic Enterprises, 2018). While the literature provides an overview of the issues and a window into effective strategies, continued research is encouraged to identify the true impact of current initiatives and confirm the most effective.

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