Editor’s Note: Online learning has the ability to motivate underachieving students and engage students beyond traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms. In this Spotlight take a look at online credit recovery programs, see how urban districts are reexamining “seat-time” requirements, and find out how educators are using competency-based education and technology to prepare for common-core assessments.

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Credit-Recovery Classes Take a Personal Approach

Developers of Online Credit-Recovery Courses Say They Are Constantly Trying to Figure Out What Will Motivate Students

By Michelle R. Davis

This school year in the Los Angeles Unified School District, there’s been a major shift in the way classes are provided to the students who need to repeat courses they have failed.

Traditionally, options for those students might be summer school classes or sitting through the same course the following semester, sometimes even with the same teacher. But now, many students who were unsuccessful the first time around can approach a course in a totally different way: online.

“We have an explosion in online credit recovery going on,” said Themistocles Sparangis, the chief technology director for the 680,000-student district. “That explosion negates the whole idea that virtual instruction is not for these kinds of students.”

This past fall, more than 2,500 students in the district took online credit-recovery courses, compared with about
300 last school year. And Los Angeles isn’t the only large urban district embracing the new technology. The Boston, Chicago, and New York City school districts are doing the same.

The reasons, Mr. Sparangis said, are numerous. Such classes allow for students to go at their own pace, for lessons to be differentiated, and for students to work free from embarrassment if they don’t understand a concept. Tracking student results in such classes in Los Angeles has shown that online credit recovery “is at least equal to or better than just giving the course again,” Mr. Sparangis said.

Because the use of online credit recovery is relatively new, there is little research, beyond anecdotal evidence, on its effectiveness in the K-12 arena. And some research suggests schools should be careful before assuming online credit recovery would work for most low achievers. For instance, a recent study of college students by the National Bureau of Economic Research noted that Hispanic, male, and low-achieving students benefited more from live instruction rather than online learning.

To be sure, Mr. Sparangis said he doesn’t expect to replace all the district’s credit-recovery options with online offerings. But he sees it as one more tool in the district’s toolbox to help struggling learners. “We’re going to continue with our traditional methods, but there is so much more that we need to do,” he said. “Adding more options is better.”

Individualized E-Learning

Credit recovery is one of the fastest-growing areas of online education, and the way course providers and developers are crafting those courses is changing quickly as well.

“We continually try to figure out what will motivate the students,” said Gregory Marks, the director of product development at the Lansing, Mich.-based Michigan Virtual University, a state-sponsored institution that produces online courses and oversees its K-12 arm, the Michigan Virtual School. “Providing context is very important.”

With a heavy emphasis on personalizing instruction, online credit-recovery courses can reach students by basing instruction in real-world concepts that help make a connection, Mr. Marks said. For example, one math unit on fractions uses a musical beat to help students understand the role fractions play in life outside of mathematics. Another course uses a trip around the state to calculate driving times, Mr. Marks said.

Such online courses also integrate media and cater to most students’ ability to navigate the Web, allowing them to click through to see concepts, or linking them to video or simulations. They can listen to audio or watch video of lectures or lessons more than once to revisit something they might have missed or not understood, Mr. Sparangis said.

Another key element of online credit-recovery courses allows students to receive rapid feedback. The feedback can come from an online teacher or from technology embedded in the program, Mr. Marks said.

That technology can also provide each student with an individualized experience, something experts say gives students a greater chance of passing a course they’ve failed before.

With many management systems of online courses, the teacher can set mastery levels for each assignment, concept, or chapter, Mr. Sparangis said. The teacher can decide that a student will progress to the next unit or section only if he or she scores an 85 percent, for example, on an evaluation.

That differentiation for each student is vital for success, particularly in credit recovery, said David Young, an instructional designer at Michigan Virtual University. For example, in MVU’s algebra course—one of the most in-demand of the credit-recovery courses it offers—students begin each unit with a pretest. If they do well, they can skip that section and focus on content they really need to learn, Mr. Young said.

Mr. Marks said that strategy came about only through trial and error. Initially, students would spend hours doing a thorough preassessment before even starting the course. The result was that students were bored, and that not much useful information was collected.

Preventing Failures

Some school districts are identifying students for enrollment in online credit-recovery courses before they actually fail a class. Through a program last summer, the Chattanooga, Tenn.-based Hamilton County Virtual School, which serves the 42,000-student Hamilton County district, focused its efforts on helping struggling elementary and middle school students.

The students took their courses in a computer lab with a facilitator present and an online teacher as well. They received breakfast and lunch and had their registration fees repaid if their attendance was good.

As students progressed through the reading and math courses, their path was tweaked every week by their online teacher. Eighty-three percent of the students successfully completed the program, said Debi Crabtree, the coordinator of the Hamilton County Virtual School, which serves about 1,000 online-credit-recovery students a year.

The first two weeks of the courses, no grades were counted, as the students got comfortable with online learning.

“Most of these kids were used to getting a lot of Fs, so we tried to start their path so that they could experience success and get used to this new interface,” Ms. Crabtree said.

Students went back to school for the new academic year more ready than before and, the district hopes, with a leg up on passing classes, Ms. Crabtree said. She plans to continue to target students with such credit-recovery courses before they fail.

“I would love to see us do so much more of this,” she said. “It’s a no-brainer.”
Demand Still Growing for Online Credit-Recovery Classes

New Programs are Being Rolled Out in Boston, Chicago, and New York

By Mary Ann Zehr

Interest in online credit-recovery courses continues to surge, prompting some policy experts and educators to consider whether traditional rules requiring students to spend a certain number of hours in the classroom, rather than simply demonstrate their proficiency in the subject matter, are increasingly outdated.

At least three large urban school districts—New York City, Chicago, and Boston—have recently rolled out or soon will roll out programs for online credit recovery. That means that students who have failed courses in high school can earn credits for those courses by making them up through online coursework. District policies vary in whether the students take the classes at an actual school or can do the coursework at home or in another setting.

Sales in the credit-recovery line of courses created by Portland, Ore.-based Aventa Learning, one of several companies or nonprofit organizations typically tapped by schools to provide online courses, increased eightfold from 2008 to 2010, according to Gregg Levin, the vice president of sales for the company.

Representatives from the Florida Virtual School, a statewide public school based in Orlando, and the Seattle-based Apex Learning Inc. say they’re noticing increasingly high demand for the use of their regular online courses for credit-recovery purposes.

Driving Forces

The increase in credit-recovery programs is being fueled by pressure from state and federal accountability systems to increase graduation rates, educators say. But that’s not the only pressure that is bringing heightened awareness of the need to step up the numbers of students who are leaving high school with a diploma, they say.

Irvin L. Scott, the high school academic superintendent for the 56,000-student Boston school system, said he would be “completely untruthful” if he didn’t acknowledge that his district’s decision to launch a new online credit-recovery program was spurred by an interest in improving graduation rates to meet regulations for the federal No Child Left Behind Act. But he said that educators also feel the need for the U.S. education system to be more competitive internationally.

“We have to do a better job. It’s not just No Child Left Behind,” Mr. Scott said. “It’s China and Dubai.”

With a graduation rate in Chicago of 55 percent, it’s not only NCLB, but also a crisis in education, that is spurring the Chicago public schools to expand credit-recovery programs, said Paige A. Ponder, the acting head of the office of student support and engagement for the 409,000-student district.

Seat-Time Rules

In light of that kind of growth, some advocates of online credit recovery feel states have been slow to create policies that support such learning.

Carmita P. Vaughan, the chief strategy officer for the America’s Promise Alliance, a Washington-based nonprofit partnership with a key mission of improving high school graduation rates, contends that some states’ seat-time requirements are a hindrance to the effective use of credit-recovery programs. With such requirements—long a mainstay of eligibility for a high school diploma—students must spend a certain amount of time in class, typically 120 hours, for each high school credit earned.

Many online credit-recovery programs, however, consider a student to have passed a course if he or she has demonstrated mastery of the subject matter. Passing is not based on how much time he or she spent online.

“The notion that students should have to sit in a chair for a certain amount of time when it’s only a certain aspect of algebra they didn’t get baffles me,” Ms. Vaughan said.

Kathy Christie, the chief of staff for the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, agreed that states should create policies that enable students to earn high school credits for mastery of skills, not just seat time.

“To work off of a proficiency base allows kids to accelerate. It allows them to make up for bad decisions,” she said. “It keeps the eye on the prize for kids: ‘These are the standards. These are the things I need to know.’”

The commission has a database, last updated in 2007, that says 36 states have provisions that permit students to earn high school credits that are “proficiency based.” Ms. Christie contends that many of those proficiency-based provisions are on the books but not implemented in most school districts in any single state.

South Carolina traditionally has required that students spend 120 hours in class to earn each high school credit, but the state increasingly is not sticking to that policy in all situations, said Valerie E. Harrison, the deputy superintendent for standards and learning for the state education department.

In the past, when a student failed a course, he or she had to make up all of that seat time, Ms. Harrison said. But in recent years, the state has given students credit for seat time even for courses they failed, though in a credit-recovery program they still don’t get credit for a course until they show mastery of its material, she said.

In addition, she said, the state has a new
policy that permits schools to waive seat-time requirements for students who are taking some courses for the first time, if those courses have been found to be aligned with the state’s academic standards and have been put on a list approved by the South Carolina Department of Education.

“We realize we need to look at ways to make sure students are able to graduate, stay in school, and support them in any way. Sometimes traditional ways of learning don’t work for some students,” Ms. Harrison said.

‘Holes’ in Research

The surge of interest in online credit-recovery programs has also come despite scant research on the programs’ effectiveness. While studies have been conducted on online learning in general, they haven’t been conducted on the effectiveness of online learning specifically for the use of credit recovery, researchers say.

“We’re interested in comparing so-called high-quality online courses for credit recovery with taking a traditional class,” said Jessica B. Heppen, a senior research analyst for the Washington-based American Institutes for Research. “There are definitely holes in the research in K-12 [education].”

Russell W. Rumberger, an education professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an expert on dropout prevention, said in an e-mail message that he isn’t aware of any research on the effectiveness of credit-recovery programs. He added that “it surely is warranted.”

“I question the effectiveness of these programs,” Mr. Rumberger said, “but without data, it is hard to know.”

Big-city districts are expanding the use of online learning for credit recovery, meanwhile, because it seems to work to get some students to earn enough credits to graduate.

The Chicago school system plans to enroll 2,500 to 3,000 students in online credit-recovery courses this summer, up from 1,000 last summer, according to Ms. Ponder. For the first time, students may complete the courses outside of school, she said. About 2,500 students took part in online credit recovery during the 2009-10 school year, she said.

Ms. Ponder said that while the district doesn’t have research specifically on the outcomes of online credit-recovery programs, it does have research on Chicago students showing that “every single credit in the freshman year is incredibly important.” That has prompted the district to target freshmen who are lacking one or two credits for its credit-recovery programs.

Seniors’ Last Chance

The Boston school district has been using online credit recovery successfully to get seniors who lack a credit or two to make those up during the summer after their senior year, according to Mr. Scott. He said 200 seniors graduated during the summer of 2009 using online credit recovery, up from 90 seniors the previous summer.

Mr. Scott explained that seniors always had the option of making up lost credits in traditional summer school classes, but that many didn’t bother.

With the online credit-recovery programs, he said, the students do the work at home, though they must visit a school site to take tests. Certified teachers are available at those sites for face-to-face help.

The 1.1 million-student New York City Department of Education, meanwhile, is poised to introduce online credit-recovery options for students this coming school year in 10 schools. In contrast to the approaches in Chicago and Boston, New York City will have the courses delivered in classroom computer laboratories with certified teachers present in the room.

Special coverage of district and high school reform and its impact on student opportunities for success is supported in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.
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At-Risk Students’ Virtual Challenges

By Katie Ash

Stepping into a virtual learning environment can help struggling students interact with curricula in a new way, begin learning with a clean slate, and provide more flexibility to accommodate work or family obligations, say educators and experts working online with students who are at risk of academic failure.

But none of those factors will make such students successful unless they have the support and resources they need to engage with the material and the motivation to work hard for their credits, experts stress.

“The way online learning is set up, it puts the control of the learning on the shoulders of students,” said Jeanne Repetto, an associate professor in the department of special education at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. “They feel the confidence and control, which is why online learning can be good for this population.”

When students do not take responsibility for their own learning, however, and their virtual teachers cannot maintain steady communication with a support team, such as a school contact or parent, the students are much less likely to be successful, said Michelle Lourcey, the director of credit recovery for the North Carolina Virtual Public School, or NCVPS.

“Our teachers are constantly working with [students] and parents to keep them [on track], but if there’s no motivation and no accountability at the school level,” the students may not make it through, she said.

Typically, NCVPS assigns a distance-learning adviser, or someone at the student’s home school, to each student to prevent that problem.

“We have found that if we can get the student feeling success in the first unit, they’ll stay with us,” said Ms. Lourcey.

At-risk students in virtual education are generally grouped into credit-recovery programs that help students who have fallen behind obtain the credits they need to graduate.

NCVPS had 2,200 credit-recovery enrollments out of a total of 17,000 enrollments in the spring of 2011. During the summer, out of 10,000 total enrollments, 3,000 were for credit recovery.

Building strong teacher-student relationships is key to helping struggling students be successful, said Ms. Lourcey.

“With at-risk students, if they feel valued, that is very powerful,” said Darlene Schaefer, an English teacher at NCVPS. “If they know that there’s somebody out there that has their back and believes in them, they believe in success and accomplishment.”

Starting Over

For some of those students, being in an online classroom may be the first time they are able to form positive relationships with teachers, said Michelle Barnhill, another teacher at NCVPS.

And once those students trust the teacher, they begin to feel more confident in their learning, said Emily Parrish, a science and math teacher with NCVPS.

“If a student hasn’t had success before and begins to feel success, they’re going to want more of it,” she said.

Having engaging, interactive content is another key to helping struggling students get back on track, said Ms. Lourcey, the credit-recovery director.

“If we’re teaching photosynthesis, we want [students] to be able to read about it, but also hear and visually see what it is and then be able to practice the concept immediately,” she said. “If [the students] master the content, they get to move on to the next concept. If they haven’t mastered it, they go through remediation, where the content is presented in a different way.”

Credit-recovery classes are kept small, too, said Ms. Lourcey, at a ratio of one teacher for every 20 students, to ensure teachers have the time and capacity to individualize the curriculum for each student.

Richard Landolt is the principal of CrossRoads, an alternative school that serves about 450 students in grades 6-12 in the 39,000-student Cherokee County school district in Canton, Ga.

CrossRoads began as a school for students who had been expelled from other schools in the district, and while it continues to serve that population, students can attend voluntarily as well. As a result, the school serves students who are on track for graduation, as well as those who may need to undergo credit recovery to graduate on time.

Students at the school choose whether they would like to work through online courses provided by the online-course provider Apex or a traditional textbook-based curriculum.

The students at the school then work in-
dividually at their own pace, with facilitation from a teacher.

How a student performs in the first semester is critical to keeping the student engaged, Mr. Landolt said. “If we can get [students] to [recover] one or two credits within the first 15 weeks, they begin to see they’re making progress and getting good grades,” he said. “It still comes down to motivation.”

‘Focus on Education’

Nick Wilson, the communications director of the Columbus, Ohio-based Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, or ECOT, a public online school serving 10,000 K-12 students in Ohio, said the continuous stream of data possible from online learning can also play a significant role in helping struggling students find success.

“We have a whole team of teachers that are responsible for assessing continuously,” Mr. Wilson said. In addition, the learning-management system used by ECOT tracks all of the students’ interactions in the courses, “so we can see how that’s correlated to their success,” he said. “You can’t do that in a traditional environment.”

Brady Exploration School, in the 84,600-student Jefferson County school system, just west of Denver, serves at-risk students from the district in a hybrid of virtual and face-to-face learning environments.

According to the school’s principal, Troy Braley, 65 percent of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, 16 percent are homeless, and 75 percent do not read at grade level.

What started as a hands-on, exploratory instructional model has since turned into a hybrid learning environment in order to cut down on the high number of disciplinary problems the school experienced when it opened in 2005, Mr. Braley explained.

“I had the worst discipline in the state,” he said. “[The switch to online classes] was not easy for the staff or the community, but the discipline issues stopped, and we could finally focus on education.”

Four years later, the school boasts a host of services for struggling students and their families, such as a clinic for free immunizations and check-ups for parents and their children, access to bus passes and bicycles, drug-treatment services, and English classes for students and their families.

The school is open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. to accommodate the schedules of the students, many of whom have part-time jobs or families to take care of, and classes switch instructional methods every 20 minutes to keep students engaged in the material.

“The traditional school just can’t meet their needs,” Mr. Braley said. Each student is assigned a graduation coach, who looks out for students who otherwise might fall through the cracks.

“If a kid’s not doing their homework, [the graduation coach] will call up the parents and say, ‘I’ll come over, and we’ll do it together,’” Mr. Braley said.

To help combat the dropout problem in the 2,750-student Westwood Community School District outside Detroit, administrators opened Westwood Cyber High School, a solely virtual school that serves students in that district. In two years, the school has expanded from 180 students to over 700.

Re-engaging Students

“All of our students are at risk, but a number of them have actually dropped out or are on the verge of dropping out,” said Hilliard Hampton, the managing director for the school. Westwood Cyber High is based on a model from the United Kingdom called “not school,” said Mr. Hilliard, which has a focus on virtual learning and project-based classes. Students in the school are referred to as “researchers,” while teachers are called “mentors.”

Students also receive home computers, Internet access, printers, and cameras to complete their virtual courses—equipment they get to keep if they graduate successfully.

“One of the key factors ... for us to understand is that when[students] come into the program, education is not high on their priority list,” Mr. Hilliard said. “The first may be to help provide food for their family, or they may have a child themselves.

“Our first challenge is to re-engage the student and raise the level of priority of education,” he said.

To do so, the curriculum students undertake is largely based around their own interests.

“We take things that interest them, such as skateboarding or even playing basketball, and apply it to projects,” Mr. Hilliard said. “For example, the amount of arc that’s required for a student to land a skateboard jump.”

By making what students are doing relevant to their own lives, he hopes the students will re-engage with the curriculum and their education.

“These are students who ... have not been successful in current or prior educational settings. You have to reinvent their confidence.”

—SUE C. CARNELL
Competency-Based Schools Embrace Digital Learning

By Katie Ash

Tom Rooney sees competency-based education—supported by digital learning tools—as the path to building a better school district.

The superintendent of the 4,200-student Lindsay Unified School District in California, Rooney set in motion this school year a plan to move to a system in which students progress not on the basis of their age or a set school calendar, but by demonstrating proficiency on learning objectives.

Educators in the district are aware that the transition will undoubtedly hit some bumps in the road, as do most districtwide school improvement efforts. But school leaders entered the school year feeling well prepared because the district has been gradually putting competency-based education, or CBE, in place since the 2009-10 school year.

The move to competency-based education—also known as proficiency-, standards-, and performance-based education—by Lindsay Unified and other districts will likely give them a head start in preparing for the new demands of the Common Core State Standards, experts point out, and in their ability to use technology more effectively to personalize learning.

“We have these practices that are ingrained in the traditional public education system that are not consistent with principles of learning and not consistent with how most of the rest of the world operates,” says Rooney.

“Prior to kindergarten, everyone learns to talk at a different time,” he continues. “They get potty-trained at different times, but suddenly when you get to kindergarten, you’re placed in this box, and you’re given the kindergarten curriculum because you’re five, not because you’re ready for it, or even if you already know it all. Kids learn in different ways on different time frames.”

National advocates for competency-based education echo those sentiments, pointing out economic and policy forces that are building momentum for such an approach.

“We’re in a place right now with the forces of global competitiveness, the adoption of common core, all of these new learning models, and the desire to do student-centered, personalized learning—you can’t really do that in a time-based system,” says Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. The Alexandria, Va.-based iNACOL is a fervent advocate for competency-based education.

“Common core is a game changer because it’s going to allow us to be able to share best practices and knowledge of skills across states, and it’s going to keep the innovators that are developing online content from having to reinvent the wheel in 50 states,” says Patrick. The ability of states to collaborate will allow more districts to be able to implement pedagogies like competency-based education without having to start from scratch, she says.

Along with a number of other partners, such as the National Governors Association, MetisNet, Jobs for the Future, and the American Youth Policy Forum, iNACOL recently launched an initiative called CompetencyWorks that aims to promote competency-based education and provide resources for educators who are interested in learning more about the model.

The CompetencyWorks organizers hope to bring innovators together and help share their experiences with more schools and districts.

“The concept is not new, but several factors have contributed to renewed interest in the structure, says Patrick.

“What’s different now is that [previously it] had to be entirely paper-based,” she says. “Now, with all of the new online and blended learning tools, teachers have a whole set of resources that can help them work with students on their learning goals. Teachers have a way to manage the personalization and allow the different pacing to happen in a very structured, goal-oriented way.”

In addition to helping teachers differentiate instruction for students, new technologies are giving rise to more powerful and detailed information systems that can help track students at the level of granularity that CBE re-quires, says Christine Sturgis, the founder of the Santa Fe, N.M.-based education consulting company MetisNet, one of the partners of CompetencyWorks.

“[CBE] creates an enormous amount of data about students and teachers and teacher effectiveness,” she says. New information systems are needed to make “data-rich and informed decisions,” adds Sturgis.

Based on conversations at a competency-based-learning summit held in March 2011, Sturgis and Patrick published a five-part working definition of CBE. Under the definition, students advance upon mastery, competencies are broken down into explicit and measurable learning objectives, assessment is meaningful for students, students receive

Now, with all of the new online and blended learning tools, teachers have a whole set of resources that can help them work with students on their learning goals. Teachers have a way to manage the personalization and allow the different pacing to happen in a very structured, goal-oriented way.”

SUSAN D. PATRICK
President and CEO, International Association for K-12 Online Learning
Differentiated support based on their learning needs, and learning outcomes emphasize
competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge.

However, re-engineering schools to a competency-based model is not a silver bullet, and
creating competencies must be done thoughtfully and carefully to be successful, Sturgis
explains in a paper about designing competencies, published by CompetencyWorks.

“If the competencies, learning objectives, and rubrics are not designed well, students
can become bored by low expectations, frustrated by high-level competencies without
adequate scaffolding embedded in the learning objectives, or disengaged through in-
consistent feedback from flawed rubrics,” the paper says. “Although it is obvious, it cannot
be overstated: Well-designed competencies are one of the essential elements for high-quality
competency education.”

‘Pace Does Matter’

Empowering students and making sure they know exactly what it is they should be
learning and how it can be demonstrated is a key component of CBE, its advocates say.

“Learners really understand where they’re at and where they’re going next,” says Rooney,
the Lindsay Unified superintendent.

To create their learning objectives, officials of the district brought together 30 teach-
ers and about a dozen administrators to go through the California state education stan-
dards for grades K-12 and realign the information into need-to-know learning objectives.
The district also worked with the Marzano Research Laboratory, run by educator Robert
J. Marzano, to help design the new curriculum.

In addition, the group created a set of assessments to go with the curriculum to eval-
uate how well students learned the material.

After several years of tweaking those standards and piloting them in classes, the district
moved to CBE officially in 2009-10 with the incoming class of 9th graders.

Teachers, who under the new system are now called learning facilitators, scrapped the
traditional grading scale and moved to a 0-4 rubric, where a 3 is the minimum passing
standard and 4 indicates that a student has gone above and beyond the requirements of
mastery.

Although students in Lindsay Unified are still grouped into grade levels, each student is
also grouped by a content level (readiness levels 1-13), so the learning facilitator knows ex-
actly where every student falls in each subject area by content level. The district also built in
more flexibility with scheduling so that students can move from one content level to the
next without having to wait for the semester
to end.

In addition, students receive frequent and meaningful feedback from their learning fa-
cilitators, Rooney says. In the new information system, teachers, students, and parents
can check to see students’ exact progress in each content area at any point in time.

But just because students now learn at their own pace does not mean that students
can take multiple years to get through one content level, emphasizes Rooney: “Pace does
matter,” he says. “Our system is about increasing the rigor and holding everyone account-
able—administrators, learners, and learning facilitators.”

Students who are more than two content levels below their grade levels receive individ-
ualized learning plans to help them catch up to their peers. Those students are allowed to
test out of certain parts of the curriculum that they may already know to increase their pace.

Ultimately, though, what CBE comes down to is good teaching, Rooney says. Providing
good feedback, making sure that students learn what they need to know before they move on,
and differentiating instruction for each student is what good teachers have al-
ways done, he says.

The Boston Day and Evening Academy, an alternative high school in the Roxbury section
of Boston that serves overage, undercredited students, has been using competency-based
education since it opened 17 years ago, says the director of curriculum and instruction,
Alison Hramiec.

The school, which does not use a traditional grading scale or group students by grade lev-
els, has broken down each yearlong course into 11-week classes so that students have
more flexibility to move from one class to the other.

“When this population of students in par-
ticular, they leave school, they have poor at-
tendance, different situations arise, and they
may fall behind in that class,” Hramiec says.
In a traditional school, she says, “when they
get back to school, everyone’s far ahead, and
there’s no flexibility to get those kids caught
up.”

But at the Boston Day and Evening Acad-
emy, students have the flexibility to start up
where they left off, she says.

Like Lindsay Unified, the Boston Day and
Evening Academy has spent several years
aligning the curriculum with state standards
and breaking it down into need-to-know com-
petencies.

“You start with [the standards] and from
there pull out what you believe are the en-
during understandings,” says Hramiec. “Those
are the big learning objectives that are the
ones you want students to carry with them
ten years from now.”

All students must demonstrate competen-
cies independently and multiple times to
move on, she says. They are given many op-
portunities to practice mastery informally
before the actual assessment.

Protecting Innovators

One state that has taken the lead in com-
petency-based education is New Hampshire,
which in 2005 eliminated the Carnegie unit, a
seat-time-oriented way of accounting for stu-
dents’ academic progress. Schools in the state
were given until the 2008-09 school year to
move from a time-based to a mastery-based
system.

Those regulations extend to the statewide
online public high school, the Exeter, N.H.-
based Virtual Learning Academy Charter
School, or VLACS, which has been compe-
tency-based since it opened in 2007.

When students take and complete courses at VLACS is flexible, allowing students to
move at their own pace. They can complete
courses in 10 weeks or take as long as 36
weeks, says Steve Kossakowski, the chief execu-
tive officer of the school.

Students must score at least a 75 or greater
on all competency-based assessments, out of a
possible 100, in addition to receiving a passing
average score on all the assignments (not just
the ones pegged as competencies) in order to
pass.

To help brick-and-mortar schools in the
state meet the mastery-based requirements,
VLACS has begun offering competency-reco-
cvery classes for students in regular schools who
have fallen behind.

“In a traditional school, one of the things
they’ve struggled with is what do you do with
a student who hasn’t met competency in a
world where everything is attendance-based?”
says Kossakowski. In the competency-recovery

“Competency-based education challenges some of
the structures that we think may be there to support
students, but may actually be limits.”

JASON ELLINGSON
Superintendent, Collins-Maxwell Community School District, Maxwell, Iowa
courses that VLACS offers, the courses are broken down into smaller units so students only need to go through the parts of the class that they didn’t pass the first time.

Interest in the competency-recovery classes has jumped from about 200 students the first year it was offered to 1,400 students in the last school year, says Kossakoski.

The Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers has brought together nine states, including New Hampshire, in its Innovation Lab Network to build new models of education that empower learners. Members of the network challenge the status quo with six design principles for transformation, one of which is performance-based learning.

“We want [states] to wrap around [innovative schools and districts] and protect them like a cocoon,” says Gene Wilhoit, the president of the CCSSO.

The Common Core State Standards have helped pave the way for innovative learning models such as CBE, says Wilhoit.

However, while innovation is happening in pockets around the country, large-scale statewide movements are rare, he says.

To push that progress along, the Innovation Lab has identified diagnostic tools that need to be developed and more effective intervention strategies for teachers.

One of the most recent states to join the CCSSO’s Innovation Lab is Iowa, which has begun to explore the idea of competency-based education. It granted districts in the state access to seat-time waivers after a forum about CBE held in December 2011. The 500-student Collins-Maxwell Community School District, about 40 miles north of Des Moines, is one that has taken advantage of the change in policy.

“Competency-based education challenges some of the structures that we think may be there to support students, but may actually be limits,” says Jason Ellingson, the superintendent of the rural district, who also sits on the state’s task force on CBE.

Although the district has not rolled out a proficiency-based education system, it is taking steps to encourage organic growth of the model, officials say.

For instance, this school year, the district will be giving out iPads to all of its K-12 students. While elementary school students will leave the devices at school overnight, middle and high school students will be allowed to take the devices home with them.

“We feel that those tools are going to be pushing the idea of personalized learning, and we think that’s going to help the discussion around competency-based education,” says Ellingson.

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Blended Learning Models Generating Lessons Learned

A variety of models for mixing face-to-face education and online instruction are generating lessons learned

By Katie Ash

Since blended learning exploded onto the K-12 scene with promises of personalized and student-centered learning, it has proliferated into dozens of different models, with educators continually tweaking and changing those methods to find the perfect balance of face-to-face and online instruction to meet the needs of their students.

Interest in blended education remains high, spurred partly by research offering support for advocates’ claims that blended learning is more effective than either online or face-to-face instruction on its own.

But more research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the evolving blended learning models, including best practices and which models work best for which types of students, said Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, an advocacy and research group based in Vienna, Va.

“The more we know about the variety of blended learning models in K-12 education, the more we know we don’t know everything that’s out there,” she said.

Michael B. Horn, a co-founder of the San Mateo, Calif.-based Innosight Institute, which conducts research on both education and health care, defines blended learning as the delivery of content and instruction partly through an online portal and partly in a brick-and-mortar location, in addition to individualization in time, pace, path, or place of learning.

Mr. Horn and his team published a white paper in May that provided updated definitions of the classifications of different types of blended learning, a follow-up to a paper written about blended learning in 2011. The new paper whittles six categories of blended learning down to four: the rotation model, the flex model, the self-blend model, and the enriched-virtual model.

However, educators are coming up with blended learning models that may not be easily classified into those four categories, said Ms. Patrick.

“There’s such a diversity of different types of programs and models that are using content in different ways,” she said. “It parallels the range of student needs that are out there.”

More research is needed, Ms. Patrick said, on the different models and which types are most effective with different students.

Delivering instructional content online opens the door for a wealth of data to be collected about each student, proponents of blended learning say, which provides real-time feedback for teachers, students, and parents.

But making sure the data are being tracked properly can also be a challenge, said Ms. Patrick.

“Both districts and schools need to look at an enterprise architecture so that their systems can generate the types of data that teachers need to know to be able to provide that direct instruction,” she said.

Judy Burton is the president and CEO of the Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit charter organization that operates 21 middle and high schools. The organization began piloting blended learning models last year and now operates three blended middle schools and four blended high schools.

Like Ms. Patrick, Ms. Burton believes that finding the right learning-management system, and using programs that will work with...
that system so that students and teachers don’t have to log in and out of multiple systems, is critical.

Through the blended learning pilots that Alliance College-Ready Public Schools has conducted, Ms. Burton said she has also learned to bring a “much keener eye” to selecting vendor programs.

“They’re not all equal in terms of rigor and the degree to which they engage students,” she said.

Ms. Burton’s organization is experimenting with a blended rotational model, in which groups of 45 students rotate between group work, online course work, and face-to-face instruction.

“I see our kids so much more interested in and excited about coming to school and about their learning because they’re no longer receptacles,” she said. “They’re playing a major role in driving their own learning.”

One area of need, Ms. Burton said, is for more classes that prepare future teachers to teach in an online or blended classroom. “We’re not seeing teachers coming out of universities prepared to work in a blended classroom,” she said.

And it’s not just teachers who need more education about blended and online learning environments, Ms. Patrick of iNACOL said.

“Administrators are not being trained to manage or implement or plan and manage blended learning programs,” she said. Providing that training in colleges of education for both administrators and teachers is critical to the success of such programs, she said.

Vision With Flexibility

Another common thread between successful blended learning programs is a clear and targeted instructional strategy, said Cheryl Niehaus, a program officer for the Austin, Texas-based Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, which aims to improve the health and education of children.

The foundation recently released case studies of five different blended learning programs.

 “[Each of the five programs] were very clear as to what the instructional aspiration was and the way that technology plays a supporting role in achieving that vision,” Ms. Niehaus said.

On the other hand, while having a clear vision is important, being willing to change or adjust that vision during implementation is key, she said. “The need for upfront planning is critical, but at the same time, there’s also a need to learn along the way and have the flexibility to make changes,” she said.

Diane Tavenner is the founder and CEO of Summit Public Schools, a Redwood City, Calif.-based charter school organization that operates four high schools in California. It piloted blended learning in math for 9th grad-
ers at its San Jose, Calif., location last year and now wants to take it further.

"What we discovered as an organization is that [blended learning] completely opened our thinking to the possibility and power of what this could look like if you really took it from blended to optimized classrooms," said Ms. Tavenner.

"Blended learning itself is an important piece, but it’s not going to fundamentally change our schools or learning or education the way we want them to change," she said.

**Reinventing the Classroom**

To create a truly 21st-century education model, or what Ms. Tavenner refers to as “optimized schools,” blended learning is combined with competency-based learning—in which students progress not on the basis of time spent on each subject but rather on their mastery of the curriculum—and personalization of learning, which she describes as “the behaviors and dispositions of people who really can drive their own learning.”

In such a model, teachers work in teams rather than as individuals, and the classroom itself looks much different, she said.

For Summit Public School students participating in the pilot, the approach means that instead of individual classrooms, students gather in an open, 4,000-square-foot room lined with breakout rooms with long tables in the center. Students receive their own laptops and individual workspaces, and for two hours, 200 students, accompanied by four teachers and two instructional assistants, fill the room.

Students work through “playlists” of resources, including online curriculum and videos from Khan Academy. Teachers hold seminars in the breakout rooms on various topics the students are learning.

Students create their own schedules; they attend the seminars that are helpful to them and work through their playlists of curricula. When they are ready to take an assessment and move on to the next topic, a teacher unlocks the quiz for them. If they pass, they move on. If they don’t, the assessment tells them exactly what topics they need to focus on to improve.

"It totally empowers the kid because they get immediate feedback, and they know exactly what they need to do," Ms. Tavenner said.

For now, students are still getting used to being in control of their own learning, she said.

"It’s a lot of hard work, and it’s uncomfortable, and it looks messy," she said. “But we believe that unless school organizations are set up [in new ways], they aren’t really going to move forward.”

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**Districts Make Virtual Course a Graduation Requirement**

Schools seek to prepare students for e-courses in college and online training in jobs

By Michelle R. Davis

This school year, incoming freshmen in the Kenosha Unified School District have another requirement to fulfill as they look ahead to graduation: online learning.

“We had very little resistance to it,” said Daniel M. Tenuta, the assistant superintendent for secondary schools for the 23,000-student Wisconsin district. “I think people realize that almost every single college student will take an online course. It makes sense to get kids up to speed.”

While some states, such as Alabama, Florida, Idaho, and Michigan, have laws requiring that students take at least one online course before graduation, Kenosha is one of a small number of districts adopting the mandate on their own, without state pressure.

“It’s a slowly building trend,” said Butch Gemin, a senior consultant with the Durango, Colo.-based Evergreen Education Group, a consulting company that tracks virtual education trends. In some parts of the country, states have indicated they may move to encourage or require online learning sometime in the future, but “the districts are running ahead,” Mr. Gemin said.

Officials in districts that have independently adopted such a requirement say their aim is to prepare students for higher education and the workplace by introducing online learning in a supportive, less high-stakes environment. A 2011 study from the Newburyport, Mass.-based Sloan Consortium, which works to integrate online education into higher education, found that 6.1 million college students took an online class in fall 2010, a 10 percent increase over the previous year.

Other school districts are banking on saving money through online learning, Mr. Gemin said.

In addition, as more districts establish their own virtual schools and online offerings, they must make sure they have a steady flow of customers. The 2011 “Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning” report from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or INACOL, found that single-district online programs were the fastest-growing model for online learning.

District online learning requirements “may be a creative way of increasing demand and even legitimizing a district’s decision to create their own program,” said Matthew Wicks, the chief operating officer for the Vienna, Va.-based INACOL.

In Kenosha, for instance, the district plans to identify courses that qualify under the new requirement through the district-created virtual charter school. The district will also identify face-to-face courses with a significant online component that could qualify as well.

**College, Career Readiness**

Elizabeth Loftis, 16, said she was nervous the first time she took an online class through her 10,500-student Putnam County, Tenn. district. But the personal-finance course was a graduation requirement and it was only offered online.

At first, she didn’t know how to access what she needed in the virtual course, but with support from an in-school computer-lab facilitator, along with an online instructor, Ms. Loftis quickly mastered the system and found she excelled at online learning.

She eventually used the district’s other online courses to skip a grade; she’ll be a senior this school year and will take six credit hours online at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville.

“I probably wouldn’t have done the classes at Tech if I hadn’t taken online classes in..."
high school,” she said. “In college, they’re not going to give you an extra day to do something or be as understanding if you have computer problems.”

Putnam County’s decision to turn a Tennessee graduation requirement that students take a personal-finance course into an online requirement was a deliberate one, said district Director Jerry S. Boyd, the system’s schools chief. The district began buying online courses in 2008 and is now developing its own courses, too.

At first, the district faced challenges, such as providing enough computer-lab space and Internet connections. Once those problems were solved, Mr. Boyd said, district officials felt it was important to require all students, starting with the 2013 graduating class, to take an online course.

“It’s a good gateway to online learning,” he said. “All of our students are going to need that opportunity once they leave high school and go on to college or into the business world.”

Mr. Boyd said he’s hoping to introduce such an experience at an even earlier level, with a six- to nine-week mandatory online course about the use of technology for middle school students.

Creating Mobile Options

In the 105,000-student Memphis city school system in Tennessee, officials were also concerned about making sure every student had the access needed when the district decided two years ago to require students to take an online course before graduation.

The district got creative, said Cleon L. Franklin, the director of instructional technology. It provided computer-lab time before and after school and coordinated with community organizations, such as libraries, to make sure students could use computers there.

Even so, Mr. Franklin said, “we’re in an urban environment, and not everyone has a computer with a high-speed connection.”

School officials noted, however, that nearly every parent had a cellphone with a data plan. So this school year, the district added Blackboard mobile, a platform from Washington-based educational technology company Blackboard Inc. that allows students to access online courses through mobile phones.

Shonda M. Keys, an online teacher for the Memphis district who currently is instructing seniors in language arts, said students are intimidated at first by online learning and don’t always realize there’s a live teacher on the other side. High school virtual learning is a way to allow students to experience online courses in a way that’s not so high-stakes, she pointed out.

“The first day you open your inbox, you’ll have 150 assignments and only three are done right,” she said. “But the kids are not afraid to ask for help, and this gets them more comfortable.”

The 8,300-student Marietta, Ga., city schools, a charter school district, had similar motivations for adopting an online learning requirement this year, despite the fact that there was no mandate from the state to do so.

The district had already pushed the boundaries in use of technology: students were permitted to bring their own digital devices to school, officials had upgraded wireless access in school buildings, and the district was already using online courses to help struggling students catch up and graduate on time.

While the district did have to add computer labs and facilitators to provide support, Superintendent Emily Lembeck believes the move could ultimately cut costs.

“It has the potential to help us be really conservative with our funds and possibly save funds in the future,” she said.

Right now, the Marietta district will require only that students take an online health course as a graduation requirement, but it will start adding additional online courses for students to take electives and regular courses. Students could enroll in multiple online classes at a time, giving them the option of graduating earlier, which could also help the district save money.

Ms. Lembeck said the approach is something other districts should consider. “Any system can do this if they plan and have the ability to provide the resources,” she said.

Distance Education

Percent of all public school districts that have students enrolled in distance education courses

Districts with students enrolled in distance education courses at that instructional level

6% Elementary schools

19% Middle or junior high schools

96% High schools

District enrollment size

Fewer than 2,500

2,500 to 9,999

10,000 or more

51%

66%

74%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics
ONLINE WORLD LANGUAGES: TRANSFORMING LOCAL STUDENTS INTO GLOBAL LEARNERS

CASE STUDY: PROVO CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

CHALLENGE
The Provo City School District (PCSD) in Utah is not unlike school districts all across the nation. It has a diverse student population ranging from the affluent to the financially challenged, with schools located in both rural and urban settings.

Like school districts everywhere, PCSD strives to make the most of the limited resources it has. One of the challenges it has faced has been to provide students access to foreign language education.

Sandwiched between Utah’s largest school district and a mid-sized neighbor, the district has found that attracting and retaining qualified foreign language teachers has not always been easy or even possible. What’s more, because enrollment in some language classes was limited, it was also cost prohibitive to offer these courses. As a result, many of the schools in the district had been compelled to scale back their language offerings.

The district’s key goals are to provide unique and inventive educational opportunities that arm students with the skills they need to be competitive in a 21st Century global marketplace, and at the same time remain competitive with nearby school districts.

That is why the Provo eSchool and its Elite Language Academy was a game changer.

SOLUTION
Provo City School District was already experiencing success with online learning through its Provo eSchool, a full-time online and blended school for grades K-12. The Provo eSchool uses the K12® and Aventa Learning® by K12™ curricula as part of a rich online program for more than 450 students.

In 2011, with the introduction of the Elite Language Academy, the Provo eSchool took advantage of its experience with online learning to overcome its challenges in addressing the multi-faceted language needs of its students. The Academy provides multiple dual immersion and online world language options for students and is based on curriculum from Middlebury Interactive Languages™, which is a joint venture between K12 and Middlebury College.

Mark Holley, Elite Language Academy’s marketing and financial manager, sums up the partnership with K12 and Middlebury, “We had tried a lot of other language programs, and determined only Middlebury Interactive Languages allowed us to grow in the way we had envisioned.”

result: Enrollment in the Elite Learning Academy has grown from 40 children initially to more than 400 in its first year

“We had tried a lot of other language programs, and determined only
Middlebury Interactive Languages allowed us to grow in the way we had envisioned.”

Mark Holley
Marketing and Finance Manager, Elite Language Academy
Together, we set out to create a language partnership that was different than what anyone else was doing. We collaborated with Middlebury to create a program that went considerably deeper than most, one that facilitated a more accessible and customized language offering.

The partnership with Middlebury not only allowed the district to address the needs of its own students, but to provide that opportunity to students across Utah.

For the first time, students across the state had access to seven world languages, each taught by fluent, state-certified teachers. In addition, students now have access to instruction 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and can interact with teachers through email, web-conferencing, and in person by appointment at the district office.

Heather Goodwin, Provo eSchool lead instructor, describes Middlebury’s appeal, “As a teacher, I really like the program’s flexibility. At traditional brick and mortar schools, if a student is having difficulty, you cannot slow down the entire class for that student as much as you’d like. If a student is excelling and has finished everything, you can’t easily move on. Middlebury Interactive Languages gives you the freedom to do both, based on each student’s abilities. That is really nice.”

RESULTS
Since Provo eSchool implemented Middlebury Interactive Languages through the Elite Language Academy in 2011, the partnership has helped the school meet its goal of providing students within the district and across Utah with access to a breadth and depth of foreign language instruction simply unavailable before.

“We started with forty kids who signed up and we are well over 400 now. When you talk about that kind of growth, you need to have a partner who is responsive and scalable. And Middlebury and K12 are. It has been a great partnership.”

Mark Holley
Marketing and Finance Manager,
Elite Language Academy

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Q & A

All Students Can Be Successful Online

2012 National Online Teacher of the Year Leslie Fetzer

Q Whenever we talk to online teachers or administrators, we always hear that it’s most important for teachers to be good teachers first, and master teaching online second. You appear to be proof of that. But how did you make the migration to virtual instruction?

Fetzer: I learned really quickly that the most important thing is to grab students’ attention, to make them excited and want to learn, to build relationships with them. And so, I would do whatever it took. I would read books that they were reading, watch movies that they were watching, and listen to music that they were listening to. So when I actually heard about the opportunity to teach online, I jumped at the chance, mostly because of the tools I knew I would get to use in the classroom. And then I realized that teaching online really afforded me the opportunity to get to know my students even better and to personalize the instruction for them even more than I was able to in the classroom.

Q How long did it take to figure that out?

Fetzer: Not long at all. I would say during the training period. And I did do both. I taught face to face and online part time for, oh, probably a little bit less than a full year before I decided I was going to take the jump and do this all the time.

Q Do you feel like it’s more challenging to teach science online than an English or humanities course, as some suggest?

Fetzer: That’s just a misconception. Yeah, sure, it can be a little bit challenging, but that’s why we’re online teachers, because we enjoy that challenge. Really, there’s a whole host of things available to help teach science online, like interactive labs, and lots of ways that you can share what you’re doing, in both kind of a blended approach where you maybe do something interactive and then do a hands-on lab.

Q In your new role as the National Online Teacher of the Year, you’ll be expected to be the face of a growing teaching role that some still don’t understand. How would you describe your typical day to them?

Fetzer: A typical day is difficult to explain because it does change daily, but there are some fundamentals that I do every day. There’s grading, so that everything that was submitted, we grade it and give feedback within 24 hours, and that feedback is always directive. We’re also going to always communicate, and that happens all day long. Another thing that I do is I create announcements each day. These announcements are a place where
I do some reteaching of the content; I just break it down into manageable chunks and teach it in a different way than is already there as part of the course content. Our motto is “See it, hear it, read it,” so visually and auditorily, we’re presenting it in a variety of ways.

Q I understand you also have some responsibilities that are a little bit different in the Occupational Course of Study program. Could you talk about that a bit?

Fetzer: So we pair up and co-teach together and communicate daily. I’ll hear from a teacher and she might say, “Angela really didn’t understand this concept,” and then that night I act like a little fairy in the night and think of content just for Angela. And while I am at it, I might pull in something that I know she really likes. If her prom is coming up, I’ll try to incorporate something to do with the prom into the lesson. So it’s very personalized. Sometimes, if they are struggling, they need a little bit of an extrachallenge. Sometimes, the entire class wants a differentiated assignment. It’s all through that communication with that co-teacher in the classroom. And some really great relationships have formed—some friendships have formed—with those teachers as well.

Q You also teach online credit-recovery courses, which have come under fire recently from some critics of online learning. Do you think any student can succeed in an online credit-recovery course, or does it have to be the right fit for the right student?

Fetzer: I definitely think that every student can be successful in [online] credit-recovery courses. I think that, just like in the classroom, you’ve got really great teachers that can grab those students and get their attention. That’s what we can do in a credit-recovery class, and sometimes we can do it online because they can move at their own pace, so they take a little bit more responsibility for their own learning. I think they also kind of get the feeling that, “Wow, this online teacher really, really cares, because they are not letting me go.” In a big classroom with a brick-and-mortar school, if you’ve got 25 students and one starts to slack off, sure you’re going to do your best to grab them, but sometimes that follow-through can’t happen just because of the sheer numbers. It’s just not the same with online.
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