# Second Chance or Second Track?

## CREDIT RECOVERY PARTICIPATION IN US HIGH SCHOOLS

**Nat Malkus**

SEPTEMBER 2018

AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

# Executive Summary

Education reform in recent decades has focused on raising standards, pushing more students to reach them, and measuring the performance of all students. While test-score growth has lagged recently, upward progress on graduation rates has not, and record graduation rates have been offered as proof of progress. However, the fact that rising graduation rates have not been accompanied by broad-based increases in high school test scores should raise a red flag. That pattern suggests that record graduation rates flow from additional supports that schools are providing to students who—in prior years—might not have graduated without them.

Chief among these supports are credit recovery programs, which help students who have failed a class get back on track for graduation without repeating a year of school. These programs are available in approximately three in four US high schools and serve 6 percent of high school students. Despite their broad scope, relatively little is known about these programs' effectiveness, administration, or where they are used most liberally.

In this report, I use a number of data sources to describe the landscape of credit recovery programs and participation across the nation's high schools, focusing on those with high participation. I combine four sources of 2015–16 universe data to look at the characteristics of schools and students participating in credit recovery and how these programs operate. Done well, credit recovery can give students a second chance to stay on track to graduation. Done poorly, it creates a second track that threatens school cultures and lowers our expectations for our most disadvantaged students and the schools that serve them.

# Second Chance or Second Track?

## CREDIT RECOVERY PARTICIPATION IN US HIGH SCHOOLS


## Nat Malkus


Since No Child Left Behind, education reform has focused on raising standards, pushing more students to reach them, and measuring the performance of all students. While progress was arguably made early on, the tide of rising standards has not been met with recent nationwide improvements in academic performance. The last two rounds of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called the "Nation's Report Card," showed declines and later flat lines in students' reading and math scores over the past several years. Disappointed by test scores, reformers and school leaders have found comfort in rising graduation rates.

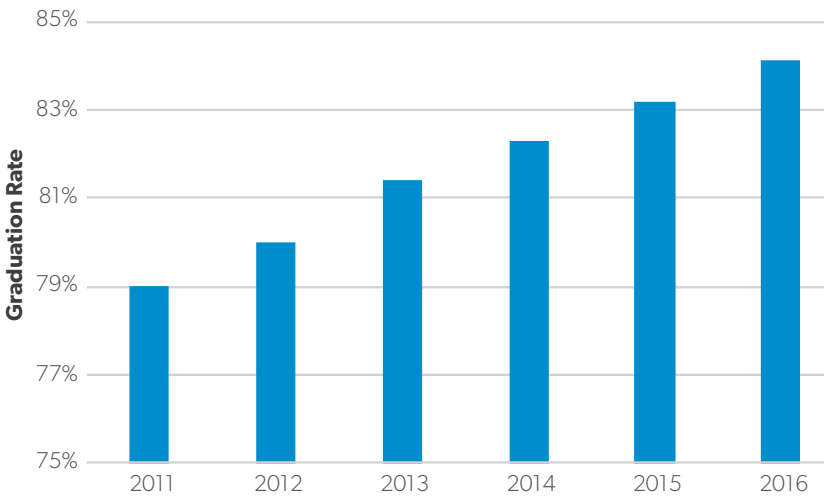
In 2016, the nation's graduation rate hit a record high of 84 percent, the fifth record in a row since the federal government redefined how graduation rates are calculated and reported.[1] Since 2011, the national graduation rate increased by five points, from 79 to 84 percent (Figure 1). This increase is enormous; it suggests that the nation cut the proportion of entering ninth graders not making it to graduation by a quarter, in just five years.

In 2016, President Obama touted these rising graduation rates, highlighting progress in the nation's capital: "We recently learned that America's high school graduation rate went up to 83 percent, which is the highest on record. . . . Right here in D.C., in just five years, the graduation rate in the District of Columbia Public Schools went from just 53 percent to 69 percent. So D.C.'s graduation rates grew faster than any other place in the country this past year. . . . That's something to be really proud of."[2]

Undoubtedly, the nations' schools have made progress on graduation rates, but there are serious concerns over how much of that progress is genuine. Graduation rates are one of the easiest education statistics to manipulate, prompting some to call them "the phoniest statistic in education."[3] Where standardized tests are time bounded and have extensive procedural protections and quality controls, graduation rates are the culmination of a variety of requirements—showing up to school, earning passing grades, obtaining all necessary course credits, and passing end-of-course assessments—with permeable oversight. School officials can manipulate these requirements—changing grades improperly, pressuring teachers to excuse incomplete or unsatisfactory work, forgiving inexcusable absentee rates, or liberally using credit recovery programs—relatively easily and with little notice. And the high stakes of graduation for students and schools make it easy for administrators and teachers to justify these manipulations with the best of intentions.

One red flag for recent record graduate-rate gains is that they are not accompanied by any broad-based increases in high school test scores. Not on NAEP.[4] Not on the ACT or SAT.[5] Not consistently on state high school standardized tests.[6] So, if rising achievement cannot explain them, these record graduation gains must flow from additional supports that schools are providing to students who might not have graduated without them in prior years. While these supports can add value, anecdotal evidence in some districts suggests that their tremendous graduation-rate gains are, in fact, unbelievable.

**Figure 1. US High School Graduation Rate, 2011–16**




Source: Adjusted cohort graduation-rate data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_219.46.asp.

An egregious example is Washington, DC, where, not long after receiving praise from Obama, it came to light that one-third of graduates earned diplomas despite violating district policies, with 20 percent having excessive absences and 15 percent taking makeup "credit recovery" courses despite never taking the original courses.[7] Without such shortcuts, the district's record 73 percent graduation rate would have fallen to around 48 percent.

Similar patterns of suspicious graduation-rate gains have been evident in major districts across the country. Nashville's graduation rate jumped 12 points in eight years despite teachers' complaints about the poor quality of online credit recovery.[8] In Chicago, online credit recovery allowed some students to receive course credit toward graduation in just eight days.[9] Los Angeles' graduation rate jumped five points the first year it pushed credit recovery.[10] San Diego reached a record 91 percent graduation rate despite teachers' warnings of rampant cheating in online credit recovery.[11] Problems have surfaced in New York City; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Prince George's County, Maryland, and the list goes on.[12]

Beyond fraudulent graduation rates, unbridled credit recovery programs pose significant moral hazards for the schools and students that use them. When used excessively, credit recovery can turn into a well-trod path around high expectations for graduates and can become a second track for low-performing students, one that leads to watered-down diplomas that do not prepare students for college or a career. Worse still, if it undermines a school's culture of expectations for students and teachers, it could normalize a path that erodes success.

Many end runs around graduation requirements are unofficial and thus nearly impossible to gauge broadly. However, credit recovery programs are official school programs, with data available to audit their use. This report gauges the landscape of credit recovery programs using newly available data on program participation for every high school in the nation.

First, I explain what credit recovery is and why schools offer it. I then review the limited literature on credit recovery to see what it can and cannot tell us. Next, I introduce a number of data sources used in this study and use them to describe the landscape of credit recovery programs and participation across the nation's high schools, focusing on those with high participation. I conclude with a discussion of the promise and perils that credit recovery programs pose for our most fragile students and the schools that serve them.

## Credit Recovery

Credit recovery is broadly defined as a strategy or program that allows students who failed a high school class to earn credit by successfully redoing coursework or retaking the class in an alternative manner.[13]

### Credit Recovery Spotlight: The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program

In 28 states, Puerto Rico, and DC, teens at risk of dropping out of high school can earn a diploma through the National Guard's 17-month Youth ChalleNGe Program (YCP).[15] The voluntary, cost-free program has been operating since 1993 and uses a military model to help 16- to 18-year-old boys and girls develop in the core areas of academic excellence, health and hygiene, job skills, leadership and followership, life-coping skills, physical fitness, responsible citizenship, and service to community.[16] In 19 states, students can take credit recovery courses while enrolled in YCP, which allows them to return to high school on track after completing the program.[17]

In Louisiana, the YCP credit recovery program is called Course Choice Credit Recovery (CCCR) and has enrolled 28 students since launching in January 2018. Before CCCR, students—who were already at risk of dropping out—would have to add an extra year to high school to graduate. Now, they can catch up on credits while at YCP and return to high school on track. CCCR courses are taught by state-certified teachers and allow students to work at their own pace using an online curriculum from Odysseyware or Edgenuity. The students' high school counselors also receive progress reports while the students are at YCP, which allows schools to keep their funding for that student.

One CCCR student, Kody Firesheets, struggled in a traditional school setting before enrolling in YCP and was hesitant about the program at first. He said what really sealed the deal for him was CCCR: "When I leave here I'll be able to go right back into high school as if I never left."[18]

Programs such as YCP and CCCR allow students who may be experiencing tough personal circumstances to get both their course credits and their personal life back on track. When done well, credit recovery programs such as this open up opportunities for students willing to put in effort to get back on track.

The purpose of these programs is to help students who have fallen behind get back on track for graduation, without repeating a year of school.[14] In many cases, students can replace a failing grade on their transcript with the new grade earned in credit recovery.

In the past, makeup credits were primarily delivered through condensed courses in summer school. Credit recovery is the "next generation" of summer school, allowing students to take these makeup courses throughout the year, in various settings and formats. When done well, these programs can support students who have fallen behind, maintain standards, and create second chances for students to meet those standards. But credit recovery can be a slippery slope toward a second track to graduation that runs around high expectations, as anecdotal evidence has suggested. This is why it is important to know how widespread these programs are and how much they are used in the schools that offer them.

## Existing Research on Credit Recovery Programs

Credit recovery programs are widespread and take many forms. The most recently published national data come from the US Department of Education's (ED) National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS).[19] According to the HSS survey, 89 percent of US high schools reported offering a credit recovery program, and school principals estimated that, on average, 15 percent of high school students participated. However, the estimates of participation rates are likely overstated because the survey asked for principals' estimates and was recorded with a 100-point online slider, which is poorly suited to gauging small percentages.[20]

The HSS survey also found that most schools administered credit recovery online (71 percent), while fewer than half used a blended model or in-person instruction in a traditional classroom

setting. About half of schools reported credit recovery classes that had 10 or fewer students per teacher, with 11–20 students per teacher in about a quarter of schools and more than 20 students per teacher in 14 percent of schools.[21] Programs were most often administered during the regular school day and in the summer (84 and 73 percent, respectively), as well as before or after school and less often on weekends (57 and 20 percent, respectively). Schools reported multiple reasons for targeting students for credit recovery. Primary among them was academic performance (87 percent), followed by absenteeism (73 percent), staff referrals (60 percent), and disciplinary issues (48 percent).

Despite the broad scope of these programs, relatively little is known about their effectiveness. Perhaps the best studies come from the American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, which focus on the effectiveness of high school credit recovery in algebra I in Chicago.[22] In general, they found credit recovery to be modestly effective, with differences in online and traditional credit recovery programs. Seventy-six percent of students passed traditional credit recovery courses, compared to just 66 percent of students taking the course online.[23] However, if the online course takers had supportive instructional mentors, their results were similar to students in the traditional classroom setting.[24] The online credit recovery courses covered more material, but students found them to be more difficult and had lower assessment scores, grades, and passing rates.[25] (Other studies, however, have found that online credit recovery leads to better completion rates and achievement scores.[26])

Despite earning back their credit through credit recovery, students in both the online and traditional courses had low graduation rates, with less than half (47 percent) graduating within four years.[27] Further, the students taking credit recovery courses faced larger issues than just the one failed algebra I class: They generally arrived in ninth grade with preexisting reading and math deficiencies, were more than twice as likely to be suspended compared to those who passed, and on average were absent 41 days of the year.[28]

Other studies have largely found credit recovery programs ineffective.[29] Interestingly, one study showed that students enrolled in multiple credit recovery courses per semester did better compared to students enrolled in just one—suggesting that credit recovery may be serving as a temptation for students rather than a punishment for failing.[30] Overall, the effectiveness of credit recovery programs is contested primarily because they only marginally improve student outcomes.

This literature on credit recovery programs is thin in important ways. Credit recovery programs vary considerably across school districts, meaning the relatively few studies that tackle program quality are not broadly representative. The HSS survey provides representative, if limited, information on how credit recovery programs are administered, but it does not provide much insight into how credit recovery programs might be problematic and what those problematic programs look like. In addition, the HSS provides a poor measure of student participation in credit recovery programs, which is unfortunate given that inordinately high participation may be the only clue in the data of where abuses lie.

## Moving Beyond the "Average" Credit Recovery Program

This report attempts to fill some of the void in the research on credit recovery programs and participation by examining data on all schools, which allows me to focus in on schools with high participation.

**Data Sources.** The recently released 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) from the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights biannually provides information on every public high school in the country and, for the first time, includes information on whether credit recovery programs are offered and how many students are participating in them. The bulk of this report uses the CRDC to provide a detailed look at the distribution of these programs and links the CRDC data with other national data sets to compare credit recovery participation with schools' graduation rates, student proficiency

### Credit Recovery Spotlight: District of Columbia Public Schools

In early 2018, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) released an audit of 2017 graduate records, which found that one in three graduates received diplomas in violation of district policy.[31] One of the major culprits? Credit recovery.

DCPS had an Evening Credit Recovery (ECR) Manual with policies and requirements for credit recovery programs. Key among these were that students must first fail an original course and have fewer than three absences in the credit recovery course and that grades earned in credit recovery should not replace previously earned grades.

Those policies were ignored when schools created their own credit recovery policies and programs. For example, several DCPS high schools offered credit recovery during the regular school day and through "Twilight Program" courses, which operate like credit recovery but grant original course credit. Schools' programs often failed to meet district seat-time requirements, and some credit recovery course teachers were not certified for the subjects they were teaching. These school-level credit recovery programs graduated large percentages of DCPS students in violation of district policy. Of the 607 DCPS graduates who took a credit recovery course (22 percent of all 2017 DCPS graduates), 411 passed without taking the original course, and 36 took credit recovery and the original course concurrently. Of the 498 graduates who took an ECR course, 423 (84.9 percent) passed with three or more unexcused absences.[32]

Perhaps worse, credit recovery eroded culture in some DCPS schools. Students were clearly aware of the option to sidestep original courses and pass through credit recovery. As the report explained, "District-wide, teachers expressed concerns that students had no interest in attending traditional courses because they could take credit recovery."[33] Teachers were also concerned about credit recovery course rigor and that student expectations were lower than in regular courses. The chain of accountability for these programs was unclear, with school-level credit recovery coordinators reporting to principals, without much central-office oversight. The Office of Academic Planning and Support was charged with their oversight but did not monitor schools' compliance and reporting on credit recovery.

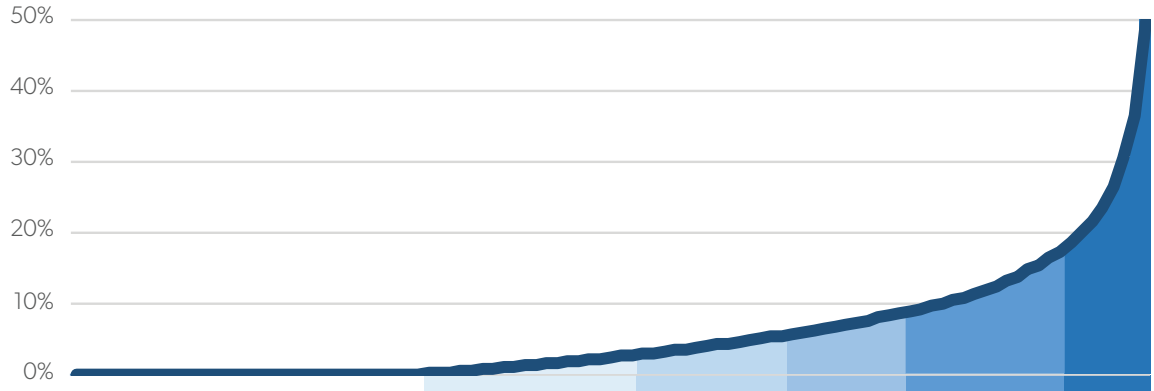
The report concluded, "Credit recovery programs, when well-managed and controlled, can provide important opportunities for students to master content and make progress toward graduation. Across DCPS, however, these programs have been misused, often being offered to ineligible students and granting last-minute credits just in time for graduation."[34] DCPS is an example of how *having* a credit recovery policy is not enough; schools and individuals need to be held accountable for *following* it.

on state reading and mathematics tests, and student demographics.

I combined four sources of 2015–16 universe data to look at credit recovery across high schools. The primary source, the CRDC, provides data on credit recovery programs and participation, as well as limited information on course success, retention rates, and absenteeism. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) adds information on each school's characteristics, including student racial composition and the percentage of students eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals. Two ED*Facts* data sources from NCES include comparable measures of student academic proficiency in 2015–16, one for reading and one for math, and another includes graduation rates from 2012 through 2016.[35] These merged files included data on 15,550 high schools.[36]

After reviewing these national administrative data to describe schools where credit recovery participation

**Figure 2. Distribution of US High Schools by Categories of Credit Recovery Participation, 2015–16**




| CR Category | No CR | Minimal | Low | Average | Elevated | Peak |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participation | 0% | 0–3% | 3–6% | 6–9% | 9–18% | 18%+ |
| Schools | 4,980 | 3,300 | 2,220 | 1,600 | 2,210 | 1,230 |
| Percentage of Schools | 32%* | 21% | 14% | 10% | 14% | 8% |
| Percentage of CR Participants | 0% | 5% | 11% | 14% | 32% | 39% |

Note: Alternative, technical, and virtual high schools; those that predominantly serve students with disabilities; and those with fewer than 50 students are excluded. *This number represents the combined percentage of schools that have no credit recovery and those that have a program with no students enrolled in them. Twenty-seven percent of US high schools have no credit recovery program. Four percent have a program with no students enrolled.
Source: Author's calculations using 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection.

is highest, I use two supplementary data sources to add information on credit recovery programs in these schools and the policies that guide them. First, I reanalyze the HSS data to uncover differences between credit recovery programs in high-participation and lower-participation schools. Second, I discuss the credit recovery policy details found in a review of 200 websites of school districts that had high credit recovery participation.

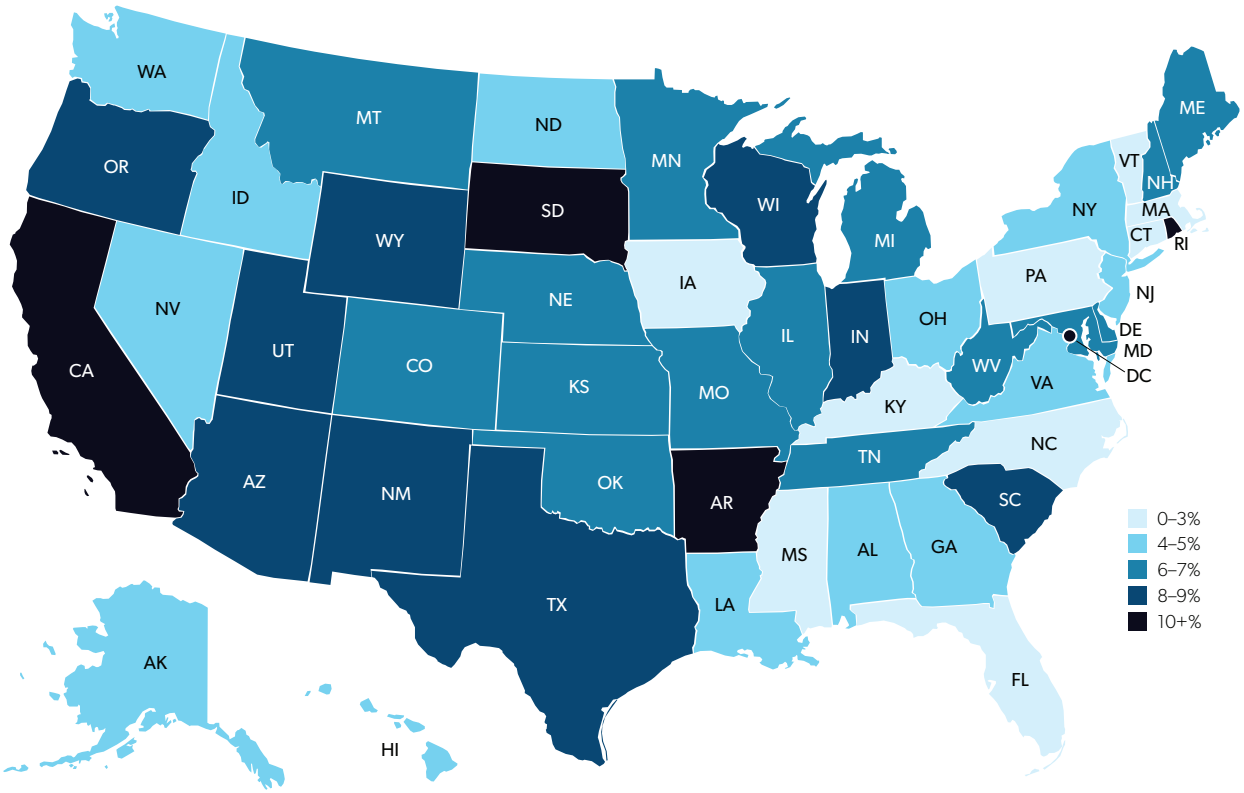
**Credit Recovery Offerings and Participation.** One would expect the HSS and the CRDC to reflect similar findings on credit recovery participation, but the CRDC numbers are far lower. Compared to 89 percent in the HSS, the CRDC data indicate that 73 percent of high schools report offering credit recovery courses and that 78 percent of students attend those schools.[37] The HSS 15 percent estimate of average student participation in high schools offering credit recovery is also well above the 6 percent reported in the CRDC. Given its more conservative estimates, as well as the size, currency, and administrative—rather than survey—data, I rely on the CRDC for the bulk of the descriptive statistics in this report.[38]

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the 15,550 schools by the percentage of students taking at least one credit recovery course. Schools are broken into six categories by credit recovery participation. (When referencing these categories here and throughout the report, "CR" will be used to denote "credit recovery.")

- **No CR.** This group includes the 32 percent of schools that reported either not offering a credit recovery program (27 percent) or not having participating students (4 percent). (Parts do not sum to totals due to rounding.)

- **Minimal CR.** This group includes the 21 percent of schools that have up to 3 percent of students participating in credit recovery. The average participation rate in these schools is 1.3 percent.

**Figure 3. Credit Recovery Participation of High School Students, by State, 2015–16**




Source: Author's calculations from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data; and 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection data.

- **Low CR.** This group includes the 14 percent of schools that have 3–6 percent of students participating in credit recovery. The average participation rate in these schools is 4.4 percent.

- **Average CR.** This group includes the 10 percent of schools that have 6–9 percent of students participating in credit recovery. The average participation rate in these schools is 7.4 percent.

- **Elevated CR.** This group includes the 14 percent of schools that have 9–18 percent of students participating in credit recovery. The average participation rate in these schools is 12.7 percent.

- **Peak CR.** This group includes the 8 percent of schools that have 18 percent or more students participating in credit recovery. The average participation rate in these schools is 28.7 percent.[39]

As Figure 2 shows, credit recovery is concentrated in a small portion of high schools. The Elevated CR group includes only 14 percent of schools but nearly one in three credit recovery students. The Peak CR category is even starker, with just 8 percent of schools but 39 percent of credit recovery students.

Across high schools with credit recovery programs, 8.3 percent of students participated in at least one credit recovery course in 2015–16, which represents 6 percent of all high school students. Participation rates varied considerably across states. Figure 3 displays states by their credit recovery participation rates. Nine states have low participation rates, of 3 percent or less, and five states have rates of 10 percent or more. Additional data across states are available in Table A1.

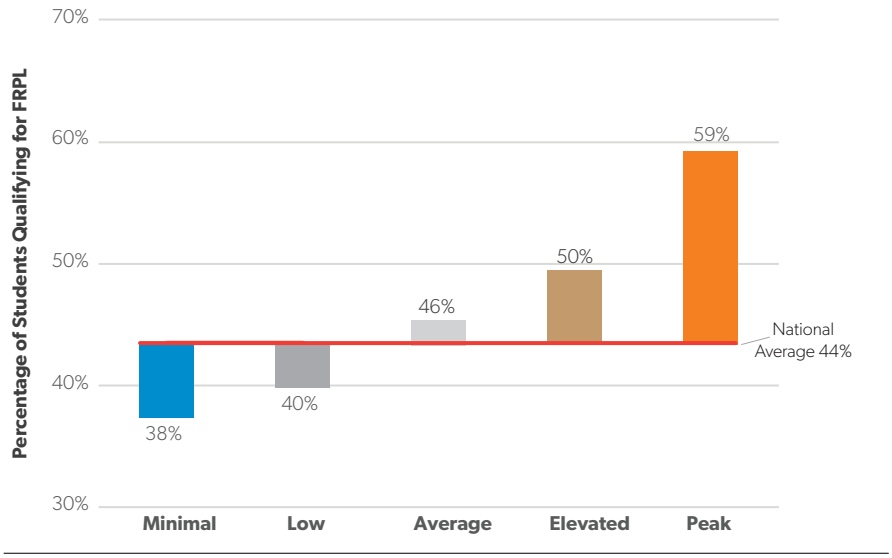
## Characteristics of Schools and Students Participating in Credit Recovery

This section explores how the characteristics of schools and their students vary among the five categories of school credit recovery participation. These characteristics include school demographics, students' progression through school, and student outcomes.

**School Demographics.** Across multiple demographic measures, the proportion of historically disadvantaged students grows across each category of increased credit recovery participation, with the largest jump between the Elevated and Peak CR categories.[40]

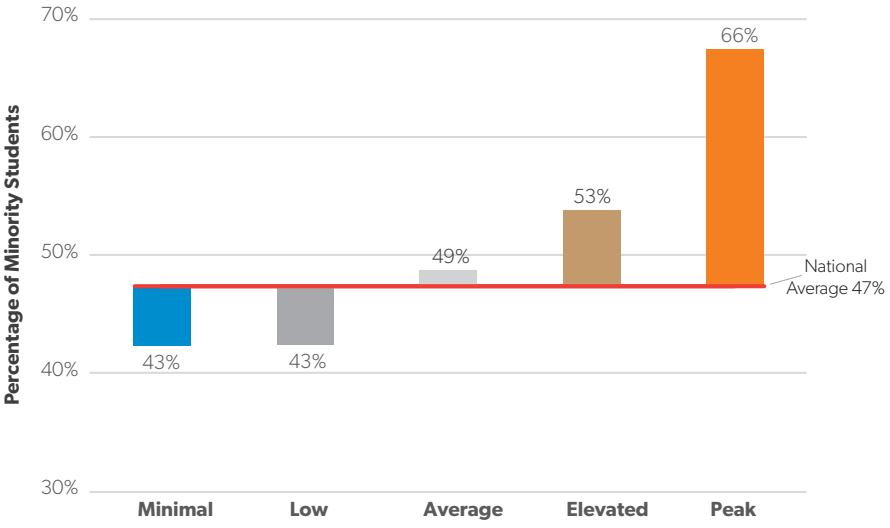
*Poverty.* Figure 4 demonstrates the percentage of students in poverty for each category of credit recovery participation, which is highest in Peak CR schools, with 59 percent of students qualifying for free and reduced-priced meals (FRPL)—nine points higher than Elevated CR schools and 15 points above the average of 44 percent. Even these stark differences may understate differences in poverty concentration, as Peak CR schools are much more often high-poverty schools and

**Figure 4. School Poverty by Credit Recovery Category, 2015**




Note: Poverty is measured by free and reduced-priced lunch.
Source: Author's calculations from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data; and 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection data.

**Figure 5. School Minority Composition by Credit Recovery Category, 2015–16**




Source: Author's calculations from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data; and 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection data.

much less often low-poverty schools. Low-poverty schools (those with 0–35 percent of students qualifying for FRPL) make up only 15 percent of Peak CR schools, compared to 40 percent of all schools. (See Table A2.) Further, about 28 percent of Peak CR schools are high-poverty schools (schools with 75 percent or more students qualifying for FRPL), which is twice the percentage of all schools (14 percent).

*Race and Ethnicity.* There is a similar pattern for minority students, who make up two-thirds of students in Peak CR schools, compared to 53 percent in Elevated CR schools and less than half of students in lower categories (Figure 5). Again, these averages may understate the pattern of minority-student concentration, as Peak CR schools are more often majority minority, majority black, and majority Hispanic. Majority-minority schools make up 45 percent of all schools but 70 percent of Peak CR schools. (See Table A2.) Compared to all schools, a significantly higher proportion of Peak CR schools are majority black (12 versus 8 percent), and twice the proportion are majority Hispanic (35 versus 17 percent). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the percentage of limited English proficiency students is also twice the average in Peak CR schools, though special education percentages are similar across categories.

While there is no clear-cut pattern of differences in terms of school size, Peak CR schools are more often urban, and less often either suburban or rural, than all other categories, and by substantial margins. (The data are not shown; see Table A2.) Many more Peak CR schools are Title I eligible as well. Both patterns are consistent with the overall portrait of multiple historic disadvantages for these schools.

**Progression Through School.** The CRDC data provide several indicators that students' progression through high school is marginally poorer as credit recovery participation increases from Minimal to Elevated CR categories and then precipitously declines in Peak CR schools.

*Course Taking and Course Passage.* Table 1 shows similar rates of taking algebra I in grades nine and 10 across categories, while passage rates decline slowly from

**Table 1. Progression Through Courses and Academic Risks, by Credit Recovery Category, 2015–16**

| | All Schools | Credit Recovery Participation | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No Credit Recovery | Minimal 0–3% | Low 3–6% | Average 6–9% | Elevated 9–18% | Peak 18%+ |
| Algebra I in Grades Nine or 10 | 28 | 26 | 28 | 29 | 29 | 29 | 28 |
| Passed Algebra I in Grades Nine or 10 | 75 | 74 | 79 | 78 | 75 | 73 | 68 |
| AP | | | | | | | |
| Took an AP Course | 20 | 19 | 22 | 19 | 19 | 19 | 17 |
| AP Course Takers Took One Exam | 72 | 69 | 77 | 74 | 72 | 71 | 69 |
| AP Exam Takers Passed One Exam | 50 | 52 | 56 | 52 | 48 | 45 | 40 |
| Retained in Grades Nine Through 12 | 3.3 | 3.1 | 2.8 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.6 | 4.7 |
| Suspension Rate | 7.2 | 6.6 | 6.2 | 7.2 | 7.1 | 8.1 | 9.9 |
| Student Absenteeism* | 20.6 | 20.2 | 19.1 | 19.7 | 20.6 | 22.2 | 25.0 |

Note: *The CRDC defines chronic absenteeism as the percentage of students missing 15 or more school days for any reason. All figures represent percentages.
Source: Author's calculations using the 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection.

Minimal to Elevated CR, from 79 to 73 percent, and then fall sharply for Peak CR schools to 68 percent—roughly a third of a standard deviation (SD) below the average. Advanced Placement (AP) participation and exam-taking rates decrease across all categories from Minimal to Elevated (from 22 to 19 percent and 77 to 71 percent, respectively) and are marginally lower in Peak CR schools (17 and 69 percent, respectively). However, passage rates for AP exam takers are markedly lower in Elevated and Peak CR schools (about 20 and 38 percent of a SD, respectively).

*Retention, Suspension, and Absenteeism.* Retention rates in grades nine through 12 also show a marked difference for Peak CR schools, which retain over 40 percent more students than the all-schools average. Peak CR schools also have above-average out-of-school suspension rates (9.9 versus 7.2 percent for all schools) and chronic student absenteeism rates (25 versus 20.6 percent for all schools). Taken as a whole, these productivity indicators show that Peak CR schools are fighting an uphill battle.

**Student Outcomes.** While the data on student demographics and progression through school are alarming, the most glaring differences across categories may be in student outcomes.

*Reading and Math Scores.* After weighting by school size, average school proficiency rates are 8 and 9 percent of an SD above zero in reading and math, respectively (Figure 7). Minimal CR schools averaged about 20 percent of an SD above the all-schools average in reading and math proficiency (i.e., 28 percent – 8 percent = 20 percent), and performance lowered by about 14 percent of an SD for each category from Minimal to Elevated. However, scores for Peak CR schools were precipitously lower—over half an SD below the weighted average.

*Graduation Rates.* Graduation rates followed a similar pattern (Table 2). The student-weighted average graduation rate for all schools was 89 percent, and from No CR to Elevated CR schools, that percentage deviated by less than 1.5 percentage points. Peak CR schools, however, had an average graduation rate below 85 percent, more than 4 percentage points (roughly a third of an SD) below the average.

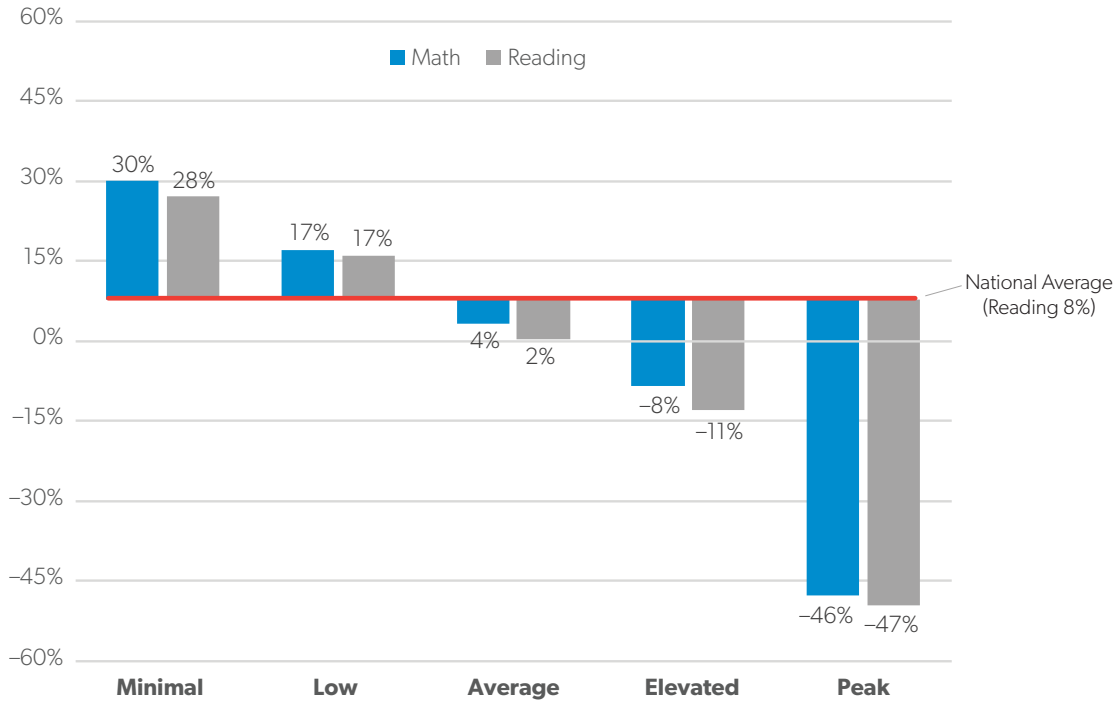
Tellingly, this dominant pattern breaks for graduation-rate *increases*, with Peak CR schools making much larger gains than schools in other categories. Peak CR schools have the largest four-, three-, two-, and single-year increases across categories. Graduation-rate increases in these schools were about 20 percent larger than average for two-, three-, and four-year increases for all schools and nearly 50 percent larger for one-year increases.

**Table 2. Graduation Rates by Credit Recovery Categories, 2015–16**

| | All Schools | Credit Recovery Participation | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No Credit Recovery | Minimal 0–3% | Low 3–6% | Average 6–9% | Elevated 9–18% | Peak 18%+ |
| Graduation Rate 2016 | 88.9 | 89.1 | 90.3 | 89.4 | 88.5 | 88.0 | 84.7 |
| Graduation-Rate Increases* | | | | | | | |
| 2012–16 | 3.3 | 3.0 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.8 | 3.3 | 4.0 |
| 2013–16 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 2.3 | 2.6 | 2.7 | 2.4 | 3.1 |
| 2014–16 | 1.5 | 1.4 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 1.8 | 1.5 | 1.8 |
| 2015–16 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.9 |

Note: All statistics are weighted by the number of high school students. *These numbers represent percentage-point increases.
Source: Author's calculations on 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection, Common Core of Data, and ED*Facts* data.

**Figure 7. School Reading and Math Proficiency by Credit Recovery Category, 2015–16**




Note: Percentages of proficient high school students are standardized and weighted by the number of ninth through 12th grade students. Weighted average proficiency is 8 percent of an SD in reading and 9 percent in math. The national average represents reading, not math, proficiency.
Source: Author's calculations from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data; and 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection data.

**Credit Recovery Participation Across and Within Schools.** These data clearly show that Peak CR schools serve far higher concentrations of historically disadvantaged students, have far fewer students successfully progressing through courses and grade levels during high school, and have much worse student outcomes than average. Although Elevated CR schools lean in the same directions, Peak CR schools are far further from average.

These patterns suggest that the quality concerns about credit recovery participation across schools further constitute equity concerns. Unfortunately, unlike most other data elements in the CRDC, its credit recovery data are school-wide numbers and not disaggregated by student characteristics such as race or poverty, making it impossible to confirm that these equity issues extend into the schools themselves. However, the ED*Facts* data on student proficiency and graduation rates are directly related to the likelihood that a student might need credit recovery, and they are disaggregated. Therefore, differences by race or poverty on these indicators may indicate that credit recovery equity issues are within schools. As seen in Table 3, large minority and poverty gaps in student proficiency and graduation rates are evident within each category. In Peak CR schools, about 47 percent of white students and half of nonpoor students are proficient, while less than a third of nonwhite and poor students are. Similar gaps are evident in graduation rates. Therefore, it is likely that the equity problem obviously evident *across* schools is also at work *within* them.

What should we make of these differences? On one side, it makes sense that, with so many more

**Table 3. Student Outcomes by Minority and Poverty Status and Credit Recovery Category, 2015–16**

| | Credit Recovery Participation | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Minimal 0–3% | Low 3–6% | Average 6–9% | Elevated 9–18% | Peak 18%+ |
| Percentage Proficient | | | | | |
| White Student | 58 | 54 | 51 | 51 | 47 |
| Nonwhite Students | 43 | 41 | 38 | 40 | 33 |
| Nonpoor Students | 61 | 57 | 53 | 54 | 50 |
| Poor Students | 38 | 37 | 36 | 37 | 30 |
| Graduation Rate | | | | | |
| White Student | 92 | 92 | 91 | 90 | 87 |
| Nonwhite Students | 87 | 86 | 85 | 86 | 82 |
| Nonpoor Students | 94 | 93 | 92 | 92 | 88 |
| Poor Students | 84 | 84 | 84 | 84 | 80 |

Note: Statistics are proportions of all ninth through 12th grade students in each category.
Source: Author's calculations on 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection and ED*Facts* data.

struggling students, Elevated and Peak CR schools are the most likely to use every support they can muster. On the other, with so many students using credit recovery—13 percent in Elevated CR schools and 29 percent in Peak CR schools—these programs likely provide students shortcuts to meeting graduation requirements that are beset with moral hazards. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive: A school may seek to provide more supports for its struggling students, but on the way these programs may turn into watered-down shortcuts to graduation.

Alone, high participation does not indicate compromised credit recovery programs, but the CRDC provides no other angles to assess the way programs are carried out in Peak CR schools and whether they differ from programs in other schools. Fortunately, the HSS survey includes some information on program particulars and a measure, however inexact, of student participation. The next section reexamines the HSS data to find differences in credit recovery programs between schools with different participation rates.

## Credit Recovery Program Operation in High-Participation Schools

The HSS measures student participation in credit recovery imprecisely, with an upward bias, and reports much higher participation rates than the CRDC. Despite this, the HSS rates can separate the same proportion of schools with the highest credit recovery participation rates as I found in the CRDC by using a higher cutoff—in this case 30 percent student participation instead of 18. The CRDC data placed the top 11.6 percent of schools with a credit recovery program in the Peak CR category, and, using the HSS data, I identified the top 10.5 percent as high-participation schools. High-participation schools in the HSS are an approximate match to Peak CR schools in the CRDC. Both groups are of similar size to other schools but serve relatively more poor students, have lower graduation rates, and are disproportionately urban. (See Tables A2 and A4.)[42]

An additional reason to look at the HSS data in this manner is that they show a clear pattern of differences. As shown in Table 4, the programs in

**Table 4. Credit Recovery Program Characteristics for Low-to-Moderate- and High-Participation Schools, 2014–15**

| | Credit Recovery Participation | |
|---|---|---|
| | Low to Moderate | High |
| Percentage with Credit Recovery Program | 90 | 11 |
| Reasons Students Targeted | | |
| Attendance Issues | 69 | 81 |
| Academic Performance | 88 | 91 |
| Staff Recommendations | 57 | 73 |
| Discipline Issues | 41 | 51 |
| Reentry Students | 33 | 49 |
| English Language Learners | 13 | 34 |
| Particular Grades | 13 | 25 |
| Times Available | | |
| School Day | 81 | 87 |
| Summer | 75 | 85 |
| Before and After School | 56 | 72 |
| Weekends | 19 | 34 |
| All the Above | 13 | 27 |
| Format | | |
| In Person | 37 | 65 |
| Blended | 42 | 57 |
| Online | 74 | 72 |
| All Three Formats | 14 | 26 |
| Exclusively Online | 37 | 17 |
| Teacher | | |
| Classroom Teacher | 64 | 87 |
| Online Instructor | 52 | 48 |
| Class Size | | |
| 1 to 10 Students | 60 | 30 |
| 11 to 20 Students | 26 | 37 |
| 21 or More Students | 14 | 33 |

Note: Graduation-rate categories (above and below 90 percent) and locale data are stratification variables in the HSS and thus unweighted. All other percentages are weighted using the HSS supplied "HS_weight."
Source: National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate.

high-participation schools are relatively unrestricted, with more options for more students to take advantage of. For example, high-participation schools offer more on-ramps to credit recovery. While all schools target students based on academic performance, high-participation schools more often target students for attendance, discipline, or from staff referrals. They also target broader categories of students—including English language learners and particular grade levels—twice as often as other schools. High-participation schools offered courses at more times—during, before, and after the school day; on weekends; or in summer—and more than a quarter offer all these times, which is twice the percentage of all other schools.

Credit recovery class sizes in high-participation schools also far more frequently approach the size of regular classes, with a third having class sizes of more than 20 students. Lastly, high-participation schools administered courses in more formats, with far more in-person and blended options than other schools. High-participation schools are half as likely as other schools to offer credit recovery exclusively online and twice as likely to offer all three formats.

The HSS data provide information on basic aspects of credit recovery programs and are consistent with some of the concerns about moral hazard mentioned above. Clear policies and oversight from school districts could mean the difference between low- and high-quality credit recovery programs. In the next section, I look to districts for signs of such oversight.

## A Survey of High-Participation Districts

Neither national administrative data nor the HSS provide much information on the policies governing credit recovery programs. Assuming that high-participation districts would be the most likely to have credit recovery policy information posted on their websites, I reviewed a random sample of 200 district websites where district-wide high school credit recovery participation rates were 10 percent or higher.[43]

## A Bridge Too Far?

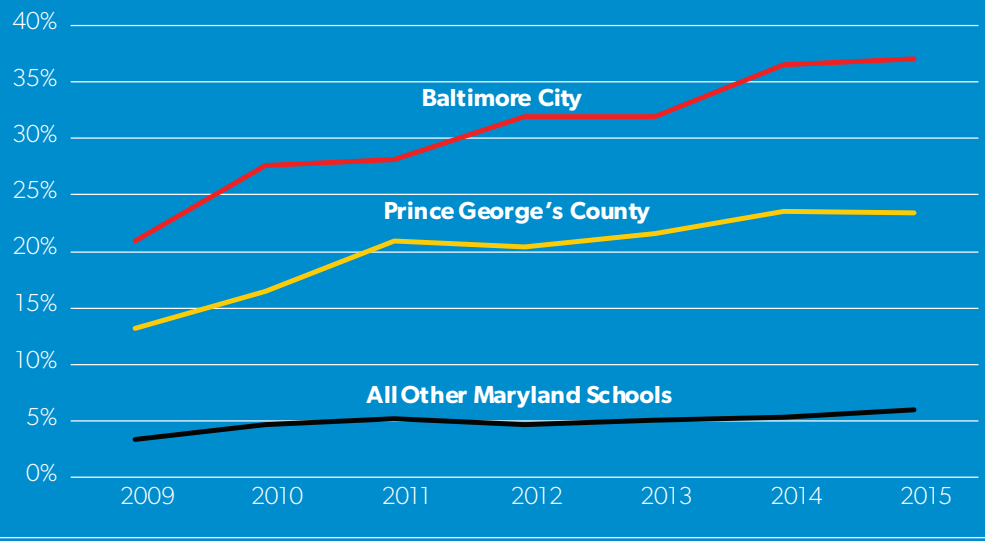
Credit recovery is not the only potential end run around graduation requirements. Since 2009, Maryland high schools have used a program called the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation to graduate students who repeatedly fail the Maryland High School Assessments (HSAs)—state-required end-of-course exams in English, algebra, biology, and government (Figure 6). In 2015, 11 percent of Maryland high school graduates received diplomas through Bridge.

Bridge allows students who twice fail one or more state assessments to graduate by satisfactorily completing certain subject-area projects. These projects are supposed to provide both remediation and an alternative path to graduation that is, according to state regulation, "meaningful, rigorous, and clearly tied to State standards."[41] While some say that Bridge offers a necessary lifeline to students who struggle with standardized tests, others claim it weakens standards and accountability for schools and the students they serve.

Like credit recovery, Bridge seems to play an outsized role in pushing students across the graduation stage in some districts. Two of Maryland's most challenged districts have more than their share of Bridge graduates: In Prince George's County, 23 percent of 2015 graduates received diplomas through Bridge—up 10 percentage points since 2009. In Baltimore, Bridge usage is up 16 percentage points since 2009, to 37 percent—three-and-a-half times the state average.

Bridge projects have become a fail-safe for Maryland's required HSAs. Bridge is supposed to be remedial, but in most districts, Bridge projects are baked right into late high school coursework, meaning they have become just another part of the standard course sequence. Students are even allowed to complete their Bridge projects *before* failing HSAs. Unlike state exams, failed Bridge projects can be revised—effectively presenting unlimited opportunities to pass. Instead of offering a second chance, Maryland seems to have instituted a second track to graduation that runs around the state's "required" exams.

**Figure 6. Percentage of Baltimore City, Prince George's County, and All Other Maryland Students Meeting State Graduation Requirements Through the Bridge Program, 2009–15**




Source: 2017 Maryland Report Card, "Data Downloads," accessed July 5, 2018, http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/downloadindex.aspx?K=99AAAA.

Through this survey, I sought information on seven basic elements of a district's credit recovery.

1. Whether credit recovery was available only during the summer;
2. Whether there was a cost for students to enroll in credit recovery;
3. Whether students could only take credit recovery in core courses (English, math, science, and social studies);
4. Whether a student had to first fail the course to take credit recovery;
5. Whether the credit recovery course grade replaced the student's original grade;
6. Whether credit recovery was offered online, in class, or both; and
7. Whether 12th grade was explicitly mentioned as a target for credit recovery.

The most surprising finding from this survey was the scarcity of information. Of the 200 district websites surveyed, 15 percent had no documentation of credit recovery whatsoever, and 40 percent only had information on one of the seven indicators (Table 5). Nonetheless, the available documentation provides some indication of the policies guiding credit recovery in high-participation districts.

Nearly half of districts offered credit recovery during the school year, while less than half that amount offered it during the summer; 30 percent had no information on timing. Few districts had information on costs, of which I assume most charged nothing, while 11 percent explicitly stated that there were no costs to students. Surprisingly, more than a fifth charged some costs to students to participate in credit recovery programs. More than six in 10 districts had no information on which courses were available for credit recovery, but the remainder was evenly split among districts that limited credit recovery to graduation requirements or core courses or that had no stated limits (15, 12, and 12 percent, respectively).[44]

While 44 percent of districts provided no information on whether students had to fail first to take credit recovery, 39 percent did require that students first fail the original course. However, a surprising 18 percent of districts permitted students to retake a course in credit recovery without first failing. Almost four in five districts failed to post information about how grades were treated after successful completion of credit recovery, 10 percent replaced failing course grades with the new grade earned in credit recovery, and 9 percent kept both grades—or a weighted average of the two—on their transcript.

Four in 10 districts had no information about the format of credit recovery classes. More than a third offered blended credit recovery programs, 15 percent offered them solely online, and only 11 percent indicated credit recovery was solely offered in traditional classrooms. Lastly, 43 percent of districts' websites explicitly mention 12th grade—apart from other grades—as the target for their programs, which is the strongest indicator of a focus on the students who can improve graduation rates in the short run.

Taken as a whole, the survey of high-participation districts' credit recovery policies are consistent with previous reports. Most are available during the school year for a wide variety of classes and lean on online delivery. Perhaps surprising are the high percentages that pass costs onto students, do not require that students fail courses first, or target the 12th grade specifically. However, the gravest concern may not rise from the information that was found but from how often no information on these basic questions was found. For programs that serve a 10th of district high school students, the lack of information suggests that too little attention is paid to maintaining standards.

**Table 5. Results from Review of District Website's Content on Credit Recovery Policies**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Is Credit Recovery Only Available During the Summer? | During the School Year | 48% |
| | Only During the Summer | 23% |
| | No Data | 30% |
| Is There a Cost to the Student to Enroll in Credit Recovery? | Yes | 19% |
| | For Some Programs | 3% |
| | No | 11% |
| | No Data | 68% |
| Can a Student Take Credit Recovery Only for Core Courses (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies)? | Any Course | 12% |
| | Graduation Requirements | 15% |
| | Only Core Courses | 12% |
| | No Data | 62% |
| Does a Student First Have to Fail a Course to Take Credit Recovery? | Yes | 39% |
| | No | 18% |
| | No Data | 44% |
| How Does the Credit Recovery Course Grade Replace the Student's Original Grade? | Original Grade Replaced | 10% |
| | Both Grades, or Average Grade | 9% |
| | Original Grade Unaltered | 3% |
| | No Data | 79% |
| Are Credit Recovery Courses Offered in Class, Online, or Both? | In Class | 11% |
| | Online | 15% |
| | Both | 35% |
| | No Data | 40% |
| Is 12th Grade Explicitly Mentioned as a Target for Credit Recovery? | Yes | 43% |
| | No | 57% |

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.
Source: Author's survey of a random sample of websites from 200 school districts with 10 percent or higher credit recovery participation.

## Discussion

The idea of credit recovery is not new, nor is it going away. Because of this, we need to understand how widespread these programs are, what the characteristics of schools and students that participate in them are, and how they operate.

According to the CRDC, 73 percent of high schools have credit recovery programs, and 6 percent of students participate in these programs. But there is wide variation in participation, with about one-third of schools having no credit recovery participation and 8 percent of schools—Peak CR schools—serving 39 percent of all credit recovery course takers.

These findings show that these high-volume credit recovery schools are distinct. They have disproportionately higher percentages of poor and minority students. Their students are less likely to pass algebra I or AP exams. They have markedly lower academic proficiency and graduation rates. While there is a paucity

of information on how credit recovery programs operate in these schools, they do show more on-ramps for students into these courses and show that courses are offered at more times and in more formats than in schools with lower participation rates.

With higher proportions of disadvantaged and academically struggling students, it is sensible that these schools want to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to get back on track to graduation, and when done well, credit recovery can provide a beneficial second chance for students while maintaining rigor and standards. However, doing credit recovery well is difficult, and with anecdotal evidence as a backdrop, the unbridled access and high participation rates found in some schools are the circumstances in which these programs can become a second *track* to graduation, not just a second *chance*.

Overwrought credit recovery programs that become a second track to completing an inferior education threaten students and schools, especially those in most need of help. Beyond devaluing diplomas, allowing the requirements schools have worked to raise to be relaxed in credit recovery programs will wear away at schools' broader culture of expectations, creating a moral hazard for schools, teachers, and students. Lower expectations in credit recovery may seduce students who otherwise might work harder to pass standard, more rigorous courses into a shortcut. They also shortchange students who do work hard to excel, only to receive the same diploma as those who shirk. Teachers are also affected, especially those who may disdain lowering standards but feel helpless to hold the line in the face of graduation-rate pressures.

Educational leaders can take reasonable steps to better understand these programs and prevent them from creating second, and inferior, tracks for struggling students who are disproportionately disadvantaged. First, while gathering school-level credit recovery data on the CRDC is a laudable first step, gathering disaggregated credit recovery participation data—as the CRDC does for so many measures—will capture which students are most affected.

Second, how we consume graduation rates is what can drive credit recovery over the brink. Progress on graduation rates is too important not to be assessed alongside other measures. If credit recovery programs are administered effectively, we should see concomitantly higher graduation rates and test scores over time.

Third, districts should keep an eye on quality controls with credit recovery programs and be transparent about the policies that ensure them. The lack of clear publicly available information in our survey of high-participation districts' websites makes it impossible to estimate their quality and effectiveness and suggests that too little attention is paid to these programs.

Fourth, districts should regularly survey teachers and students to assess how credit recovery programs are affecting schools. Where official reports and statistics can leave slipping quality hidden, surveys of those on the ground in school can effectively, cheaply, and easily identify problems.

Finally, districts should carefully consider reasonable deterrents to credit recovery, including fees or limiting availability to weekends or the summer. Finding the right balance will be tricky, but making credit recovery too easy for students makes failing initial courses more tempting and puts the entire enterprise of raising academic standards at risk, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

As national graduation rates continue to hit record highs, understanding how that progress is made—including through credit recovery—becomes increasingly important. That schools with the highest credit recovery participation also have the highest graduation-rate increases should raise serious concerns that these programs are devaluing diplomas and leaving students unprepared to negotiate the worlds of college or careers. Certainly, many schools are making legitimate strides for students, but credit recovery makes it difficult to determine which schools those are.

In the end, credit recovery is part of our world, and these programs and participation in them will likely increase. This makes how we use them especially important. Like anything in education, it is less important *whether* schools are using credit recovery and more important *how* they implement it. Done well, credit

recovery can give students a second chance to stay on track for graduation. Done poorly, we threaten school cultures and our expectations for students, all for a second track that will not serve our most disadvantaged students, or the schools that serve them, well.

## About the Author

**Nat Malkus** is a resident scholar and the deputy director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, where he specializes in K–12 education.

# Appendix A

**Table A1. Credit Recovery Programs and Participation by State, 2015–16**

| | High Schools Offering Credit Recovery | Credit Recovery Participation | High-Participation Schools | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 9% or Higher | 18% or Higher |
| Alabama | 83% | 5% | 13% | 3% |
| Alaska | 61% | 4% | 22% | 6% |
| Arizona | 63% | 8% | 28% | 14% |
| Arkansas | 84% | 10% | 35% | 13% |
| California | 73% | 10% | 35% | 17% |
| Colorado | 81% | 7% | 29% | 10% |
| Connecticut | 63% | 3% | 8% | 4% |
| Delaware | 81% | 7% | 21% | 0% |
| District of Columbia | 85% | 12% | 57% | 25% |
| Florida | 70% | 2% | 4% | 0% |
| Georgia | 83% | 4% | 13% | 4% |
| Hawaii | 85% | 4% | 11% | 0% |
| Idaho | 63% | 4% | 18% | 4% |
| Illinois | 79% | 6% | 20% | 8% |
| Indiana | 80% | 9% | 39% | 15% |
| Iowa | 36% | 3% | 11% | 3% |
| Kansas | 75% | 6% | 18% | 5% |
| Kentucky | 57% | 3% | 15% | 3% |
| Louisiana | 64% | 5% | 23% | 8% |
| Maine | 73% | 6% | 23% | 8% |
| Maryland | 96% | 7% | 29% | 5% |
| Massachusetts | 53% | 3% | 7% | 2% |
| Michigan | 77% | 7% | 31% | 12% |
| Minnesota | 69% | 6% | 22% | 8% |
| Mississippi | 73% | 3% | 6% | 1% |
| Missouri | 83% | 7% | 26% | 7% |
| Montana | 85% | 6% | 21% | 3% |
| Nebraska | 80% | 7% | 14% | 5% |
| Nevada | 44% | 4% | 29% | 12% |
| New Hampshire | 76% | 6% | 24% | 8% |
| New Jersey | 75% | 4% | 14% | 4% |
| New Mexico | 71% | 9% | 40% | 22% |
| New York | 68% | 4% | 16% | 5% |
| North Carolina | 52% | 2% | 3% | 0% |

*(continued on the next page)*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Dakota | 73% | 4% | 15% | 4% |
| Ohio | 62% | 5% | 19% | 9% |
| Oklahoma | 73% | 7% | 18% | 5% |
| Oregon | 81% | 8% | 40% | 20% |
| Pennsylvania | 67% | 3% | 9% | 4% |
| Rhode Island | 56% | 10% | 38% | 19% |
| South Carolina | 95% | 8% | 35% | 9% |
| South Dakota | 76% | 10% | 26% | 11% |
| Tennessee | 82% | 7% | 27% | 7% |
| Texas | 79% | 8% | 32% | 9% |
| Utah | 81% | 9% | 43% | 16% |
| Vermont | 56% | 3% | 6% | 2% |
| Virginia | 70% | 4% | 14% | 6% |
| Washington | 75% | 5% | 22% | 6% |
| West Virginia | 96% | 7% | 32% | 7% |
| Wisconsin | 79% | 8% | 27% | 10% |
| Wyoming | 83% | 9% | 43% | 15% |

Source: Author's calculations using 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection.

## Table A2. School Characteristics by Credit Recovery Participation

| | All Schools | Credit Recovery Participation | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No Credit Recovery | Minimal 0–3% | Low 3–6% | Average 6–9% | Elevated 9–18% | Peak 18%+ |
| Schools | 15,550 | 4,980 | 3,300 | 2,220 | 1,610 | 2,210 | 1,230 |
| | | 32% | 21% | 14% | 10% | 14% | 8% |
| CR Participation* | 6% | 0% | 1.3% | 4.4% | 7.4% | 12.7% | 28.7% |
| Student Characteristics | | | | | | | |
| FRPL | 44% | 42% | 38% | 40% | 46% | 50% | 59% |
| Minority Percentage | 47% | 44% | 43% | 43% | 49% | 53% | 66% |
| Black | 15% | 14% | 15% | 16% | 15% | 15% | 20% |
| Hispanic | 23% | 22% | 18% | 18% | 25% | 29% | 37% |
| White | 53% | 56% | 57% | 57% | 51% | 47% | 34% |
| Limited English Proficiency | 5% | 5% | 4% | 4% | 6% | 7% | 10% |
| Special Education | 12% | 11% | 11% | 11% | 12% | 12% | 13% |
| School Characteristics | | | | | | | |
| FRPL Categories | | | | | | | |
| 0–35 | 40% | 43% | 51% | 45% | 36% | 30% | 15% |
| 35–50 | 21% | 20% | 18% | 23% | 21% | 23% | 19% |
| 50–75 | 25% | 23% | 21% | 23% | 27% | 30% | 38% |
| 75–100 | 14% | 13% | 9% | 9% | 15% | 17% | 28% |
| Title I Schools | 58% | 57% | 53% | 54% | 59% | 65% | 71% |
| School-Wide Title I | 43% | 43% | 36% | 38% | 45% | 51% | 59% |
| Minority Majority | 45% | 45% | 37% | 37% | 46% | 53% | 70% |
| Majority Black | 8% | 8% | 8% | 9% | 7% | 9% | 12% |
| Majority Hispanic | 17% | 17% | 10% | 11% | 20% | 23% | 35% |
| Location | | | | | | | |
| Urban | 27% | 30% | 25% | 22% | 28% | 33% | 45% |
| Suburban | 40% | 38% | 46% | 41% | 39% | 35% | 31% |
| Rural | 32% | 32% | 29% | 37% | 33% | 32% | 24% |
| Size | | | | | | | |
| Less Than 1,000 Students | 32% | 39% | 27% | 32% | 29% | 31% | 29% |
| 1,000–1,999 Students | 41% | 38% | 42% | 42% | 43% | 41% | 42% |
| 2,000+ Students | 27% | 23% | 31% | 26% | 28% | 28% | 29% |
| Student Outcomes | | | | | | | |
| School Proficiency (z) | | | | | | | |
| Reading | 8% | 15% | 28% | 17% | 2% | –11% | –47% |
| Math | 9% | 16% | 30% | 17% | 4% | –8% | –46% |
| Graduation Rates | | | | | | | |
| Graduation Rate 2016 | 88.9% | 88.4% | 90.0% | 89.2% | 88.4% | 88.0% | 84.4% |
| Graduation-Rate Increases† | | | | | | | |
| 2012–16 | 3.3 | 2.9 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.8 | 3.3 | 4.0 |
| 2013–16 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 2.3 | 2.6 | 2.7 | 2.4 | 3.1 |
| 2014–16 | 1.6 | 1.4 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 1.8 | 1.5 | 1.8 |
| 2015–16 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.7 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.9 |

Note: *About 70 high schools reported over 75 percent participation in credit recovery and were removed from the average participation rates as outliers but included for other descriptive statistics. † Graduation-rate increases are percentage points.
Source: Author's calculations on 2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection, Common Core of Data, and ED*Facts* data.

**Table A3. Percentage of Students Meeting Maryland State Graduation Requirements Through the Bridge Program, 2009–15**

| | Percentage of Students Passing via Bridge Program | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | All Other Maryland Schools | Baltimore City | Prince George's County |
| 2009 | 3.3% | 20.9% | 13.2% |
| 2010 | 4.6% | 27.6% | 16.5% |
| 2011 | 5.1% | 28.2% | 20.9% |
| 2012 | 4.7% | 32.0% | 20.4% |
| 2013 | 5.0% | 32.0% | 21.6% |
| 2014 | 5.3% | 36.5% | 23.6% |
| 2015 | 6.0% | 37.0% | 23.4% |

Source: 2017 Maryland Report Card, "Data Downloads," accessed July 5, 2018, http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/downloadindex.aspx?K=99AAAA.

**Table A4. Credit Recovery Program Characteristics for Low-to-Moderate- and High-Participation Schools, 2014–15**

| | Credit Recovery Participation | |
|---|---|---|
| | Low to Moderate | High |
| Percentage of Schools with Credit Recovery Program | 90 | 11 |
| Reasons Students Targeted | | |
| Attendance Issues | 69 | 81 |
| Academic Performance | 88 | 91 |
| Staff Recommendations | 57 | 73 |
| Discipline Issues | 41 | 51 |
| Reentry Students | 33 | 49 |
| English Language Learner | 13 | 34 |
| Particular Grades | 13 | 25 |
| Times Available | | |
| School Day | 81 | 87 |
| Summer | 75 | 85 |
| Before and After School | 56 | 72 |
| Weekends | 19 | 34 |
| All the Above | 13 | 27 |

*(continued on the next page)*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Format | | |
| In Person | 37 | 65 |
| Blended | 42 | 57 |
| Online | 74 | 72 |
| All Three Formats | 14 | 26 |
| Exclusively Online | 37 | 17 |
| Teacher | | |
| Classroom Teacher | 64 | 87 |
| Online Instructor | 52 | 48 |
| Class Size | | |
| 1 to 10 Students | 60 | 30 |
| 11 to 20 Students | 26 | 37 |
| 21 or More Students | 14 | 33 |
| Location | | |
| At School | 95 | 97 |
| Home | 44 | 51 |
| Another School | 18 | 18 |
| Poverty Level | | |
| 0–35% | 33 | 10 |
| 36–50% | 26 | 15 |
| 50%+ | 42 | 75 |
| Graduation Rate | | |
| Low | 31 | 64 |
| High | 69 | 36 |
| Locale | | |
| Rural | 43 | 15 |
| Suburban | 37 | 44 |
| Urban | 20 | 41 |
| School Size | | |
| Less Than 500 Students | 53 | 42 |
| 500–1,199 Students | 24 | 27 |
| 1,200 Students | 23 | 37 |

Note: The HSS defines high graduation rates as above, low rates as above, and low rates as below 68 percent.
Source: National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate survey data.

# Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Table 1. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographic Characteristics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2015–16," October 25, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2015-16.asp.

2. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Education" (speech, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, Washington, DC, October 17, 2016), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/17/remarks-president-education.

3. Robert Pondiscio, "The Phoniest Statistic in Education," Flypaper, January 13, 2016, https://edexcellence.net/articles/the-phoniest-statistic-in-education.

4. Nation's Report Card, "Average Mathematics Score Lower and Reading Score Unchanged," https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_g12_2015/.

5. National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 226.50. Number and Percentage of Graduates Taking the ACT Test; Average Scores and Standard Deviations, by Sex and Race/Ethnicity; and Percentage of Test Takers with Selected Composite Scores and Planned Fields of Postsecondary Study: Selected Years, 1995 Through 2016," May 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_226.50.asp?current=yes; and National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 226.20. SAT Mean Scores of College-Bound Seniors, by Sex: 1966–67 Through 2015–16," January 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_226.20.asp?current=yes.

6. Jessica Mazzola, "3rd Year of PARCC: Are N.J. Students Making the Grade?," NJ.com, July 26, 2017, https://www.nj.com/education/2017/07/3rd_year_of_parcc_scores_mostly_up_high_schoolers.html; 2017 Maryland Report Card, "2016 to 2017 MSAA Results for English/Language Arts Grade 11, All Students," http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/MSAAHighTrends.aspx?PV=189:11:99:AAAA:1:N:0:13:1:2:4:1:1:1:3; District of Columbia Public Schools, *PARCC 2017 Final Results*, August 2017, https://dcps.dc.gov/publication/parcc-2017-final-results; and EdSource, "State of California," http://caaspp.edsource.org/sbac/statewide.

7. Alvarez and Marsal, "Final Report District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation," Office of the State Superintendent of Education, January 26, 2018, https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/release_content/attachments/Report%20on%20DCPS%20Graduation%20and%20Attendance%20Outcomes%20-%20Alvarez%26Marsal.pdf.

8. Andrea Zelinski, "Teachers Say Metro's Credit-Recovery System Provides a Poor Excuse for an Education," Nashville Scene, December 3, 2015, https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/article/13062277/teachers-say-metros-creditrecovery-system-provides-a-poor-excuse-for-an-education.

9. Francesca Berardi, "Take These Students, Please," *Slate*, May 24, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/schooled/2017/05/chicago_now_has_schools_where_online_learning_is_all_the_kids_do.html.

10. Sonali Kohli, "Schools Are Boosting Graduation Rates by Offering 'Credit Recovery.' But What Are Students Learning?," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-edu-pass-credit-recovery-20170701-htmlstory.html.

11. Mario Koran, "It Is Shockingly Easy to Cheat San Diego Unified's Online Courses," *Voice of San Diego*, May 17, 2017, https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/education/cheat-on-online-courses-san-diego/.

12. Geoff Decker and Sarah Darville, "Behind City's Latest Credit-Recovery Controversy Is a Complicated History," Chalkbeat, August 5, 2015, https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2015/08/05/behind-citys-latest-credit-recovery-controversy-is-a-complicated-history/; Dedrick Russell, "Allegations Arise Claiming Failing CMS Students Are Still Receiving HS Diploma," WBTV Channel 3 News, July 27, 2017, http://www.wbtv.com/story/35990402/allegations-arise-claiming-failing-cms-students-are-still-receiving-hs-diploma; and Donna St. George and Arelis R. Hernandez, "Some Employees in a Large Maryland School System See Signs of Grade Tampering," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/some-employees-in-a-large-maryland-school-system-see-signs-of-grade-tampering/2017/07/01/02a4ee76-56c8-11e7-b38e-35fd8e0c288f_story.html.

13. US Department of Education, "Issue Brief: Credit Recovery," March 2018, https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/high-school/credit-recovery.pdf.

14. Civil Rights Data Collection, "Master List of 2015–2016 CRDC Definitions," https://crdc.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=20523.

15. National Guard Youth ChalleNGe, "About the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program," 2015, https://www.jointservicessupport.org/ngycp/program/oOqADNbz8U6AEAQwKK5dpQ.

16. National Guard Youth ChalleNGe, "Core Components," 2015, https://www.jointservicessupport.org/ngycp/core-components/EeqO-z8MgUK9NFRHRW8flQ.

17. National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, "2015 Performance and Accountability Highlights," https://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Documents/MRA_Docs/RI/2015%20NGYCP%20Annual%20Report%20Final.pdf.

18. Allison Bazzle, "YCP Credit Recovery Program Gives Cadets a Second Chance at a Diploma," KALB, June 8, 2018, http://www.kalb.com/content/news/YCP-Credit-Recovery-Program-gives-cadets--485000711.html.

19. HHS collected self-reported data from principals from a nationally representative sample of 2,142 high schools during the 2014–15 school year. The HSS collected data on a number of student support strategies, including credit recovery data available from 1,925 schools.

20. This means they offered students at least one credit recovery course. Data on student participation were collected by asking respondents, mostly high school principals, "On average, approximately what percentage of high [school] (*sic*) students in your school is participating in credit recovery at any location in the 2014–15 school year?" Respondents entered their estimate using an online slider ranging from 0 to 100 percent. Using a slider for such a question is arguably a poor choice for gathering estimates for a question for which many responses could ostensibly be in the single digits. Sliders are more often used to estimate smaller scales, with choices of five to 10 responses rather than 100.

21. Ten percent were conducted wholly online, so class size is not relevant.

22. Jordan Rickles et al., "Getting Back on Track: Who Needs to Recover Algebra Credit After Ninth Grade?," American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, April 7, 2016, https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Algebra-Credit-Recovery.pdf.

23. Jordan Rickles et al., "Getting Back on Track: Course Progression for Students Who Fail Algebra I in Ninth Grade," American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, June 30, 2017, https://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/Course-Progression-for-Students-Who-Fail-Algebra-I-in-Ninth-Grade-June-2017.pdf.

24. Suzanne Taylor et al., "Getting Back on Track: The Role of In-Person Instructional Support for Students Taking Online Credit Recovery," American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, April 7, 2016, https://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/In-Person-Support-Credit-Recovery.pdf.

25. Jessica Heppen et al., "Getting Back on Track: Comparing the Effects of Online and Face-to-Face Credit Recovery in Algebra I," American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, April 8, 2016, https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Online-vs-F2F-Credit-Recovery.pdf.

26. John Hughes, Chengfu Zhou, and Yaacov Petscher, "Comparing Success Rates for General and Credit Recovery Courses Online and Face to Face: Results for Florida High School Courses," Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University, September 2015, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED559978.

27. Jordan Rickles et al., "Getting Back on Track: The Effect of Online Versus Face-to-Face Credit Recovery in Algebra I on High School Credit Accumulation and Graduation," American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, June 30, 2017, https://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/Effect-Online-Versus-Face-to-Face-Credit-Recovery-in-Algebra-High-School-Credit-Accumulation-and-Graduation-June-2017.pdf.

28. Jordan Rickles et al., "Getting Back on Track: Who Needs to Recover Algebra Credit After Ninth Grade?," American Institutes for Research and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, April 7, 2016, https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Algebra-Credit-Recovery.pdf.

29. Elaine Allensworth et al., "Paper 4: Effects of Expanding Summer Credit Recovery in Algebra," Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2011, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED562706.pdf; and David Stevens et al., "Online Credit Recovery: Enrollment and Passing Patterns in Montana Digital Academy Courses," Education Northwest, June 2016 https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/

ED566910.pdf.

30. Stevens, "Online Credit Recovery."

31. Alvarez and Marsal, "Final Report District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation."

32. Alvarez and Marsal, "Final Report District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation."

33. Alvarez and Marsal, "Final Report District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation."

34. Alvarez and Marsal, "Final Report District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation."

35. ED*Facts* proficiency data are based on tests and proficiency benchmarks that vary across states. To create comparable measures across states, I standardized high school math and reading proficiency measures within states, and then across states, for standardized measures with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one for all high schools in the nation. When weighted by school size, the means for math and reading are above zero (7 and 9 percent of a standard deviation, respectively). See Table A2. ED*Facts* graduation rates were reported without adjustment. Graduation rates differ by state, as does credit recovery participation, meaning average graduation rates presented by credit recovery participation may be biased. Converting rates to percentile ranks within states exhibits a similar pattern to that shown in Table A2, but only rates are presented for ease of interpretation.

36. The analytic data set included all schools included in the CCD and CRDC data that were not elementary or middle schools, juvenile justice facilities, or special education, career and technical, alternative, or virtual schools and that had at least 50 high school students, with at least 25 in 12th grade. Over 600 high school identifiers were mismatched in the CCD and CRDC, including all New York City high schools, and they had to be matched by name and Local Education Agency number. A total of 15,550 high schools are included in these analyses. All school counts are rounded to the nearest 10 to comply with NCES disclosure rules.

37. Since both use similar definitions for credit recovery and report data from the 2014–15 and 2015–16 school years, respectively, they should produce similar results. The HSS defines credit recovery programs as "credit-bearing courses to help students make up failed classes and keep them on track for graduation." The CRDC defines credit recovery programs as programs that "(including courses or other instruction) aim to help schools graduate more students by giving students who have fallen behind the chance to 'recover' credits through a multitude of different strategies, including online. Different programs allow students to work on their credit recovery classes over the summer, on school breaks, after school, on weekends, at home on their own, at night in school computer labs, or even during the school day."

38. It is impossible to definitively state that the CRDC is more accurate than the HSS estimates, but the CRDC is likely the more accurate of the two. The CRDC includes universe data from 14,090 high schools (compared to HSS's 1,930) and is part of a larger and regular administrative data collection overseen by the federal government, and responses are required by law and certified by respondents (in contrast to the HSS, which is a voluntary one-time survey). While this discrepancy should warrant attention from the Department of Education, which sponsors both surveys, both remain useful for this inquiry. First, they are the only two nationally representative data sets with data on credit recovery. Second, within each collection, the data were gathered consistently, meaning any patterns of differences between schools by levels of credit recovery participation should be indicative of directional differences, if not exact estimates.

39. Schools with 75 percent or higher participation rates were considered outliers and excluded from this calculated average.

40. Schools in the No CR group are not included on all tables and figures because, generally, these schools are quite close to all schools across most measures. Data on all categories and all schools are presented in the appendix.

41. Maryland State Department of Education, "Bridge Plan for Academic Validation Administrative Manual," August 2017, http://mdk12.msde.maryland.gov/share/pdf/bridge_final.pdf.

42. Although identifying HSS schools using administrative data on credit recovery would be preferable, the HSS's pseudo school IDs prevent such matching, and until such data become available, the HSS provides the best available look at these programs.

43. The cutoff for high participation is lower for districts than for individual schools because with more schools, their average participation rates are lower than individual schools. Of roughly 9,850 districts that had a high school that offered credit recovery, 21 percent, or 2,040, had a 10 percent average participation rate.

44. For our survey purposes, core courses included math, science, English, and social studies.