



Expanding  
**minds**  
and Opportunities

Leveraging

# the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit [www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds](http://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds).

## About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at [www.expandinglearning.org](http://www.expandinglearning.org).

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## Providing Innovative Opportunities and Options for Credit Recovery Through Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs

*Credit recovery* refers to efforts undertaken to allow students to earn high school Carnegie units needed for graduation. Credit recovery permits students to make up courses that they have previously failed due to excessive absences, inability to grasp the content, or other factors associated with academic failure.

Credit recovery programs take various forms, ranging from retaking a course in an alternative time or setting (before school, after school, in night school, or during the summer) or through an alternative methodology (via an approved project that satisfies course requirements or through online learning). Generally, students are eligible to enroll in credit recovery programs if they have met the “seat time” requirements for a course needed for graduation but have failed to meet the end-of-course standards required to receive credit; that is, if they have attempted to take the course and failed, rather than taking it for the first time.

Online credit recovery programs are increasingly prevalent due to the pressure felt by school districts to improve graduation rates through the No Child Left Behind Act coupled with the increase in educational technology in schools and the growth in providers of online course content aligned with state education standards.

Among states reporting dropout data to the U.S. Department of Education in 2006, 26.8% of public high school students do not graduate with a regular diploma 4 years after starting ninth grade. The report also shows that students from low-income families were roughly 10 times less likely to complete high school between 2006 and 2007 than were students from high-income families. In October 2007, approximately 3.3 million civilian non-institutionalized (meaning those not committed to an institution) 16- through 24-year-olds were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009).

Failure to obtain a high school diploma has severe consequences. The annual median income of a male over the age of 24 without a high school diploma is approximately \$27,000. By contrast, a similar individual with a high school diploma earns almost \$37,000 annually (Sable, Gaviola, & Hoffman, 2007). High school dropouts also face higher rates of imprisonment; those without high school diplomas are more likely to end up incarcerated than those who complete high school successfully (Harlow, 2003). The financial and social costs stemming from high school failure and high dropout rates in the United States are enormous when considering the loss of income and productivity and the costs of incarceration and rehabilitation. It has been estimated that dropouts cost the nation billions of dollars annually (Ou & Reynolds, 2010).

### **Promising Practices for Credit Recovery**

As the need for credit recovery programs has become more apparent and urgent, districts have begun to look toward advances in instructional technology as a solution. Unfortunately, many obstacles prevent students in need of credit recovery from taking advantage of the flexibility and convenience of online learning, including a lack of computer skills (Oliver et al., 2007) and the self-regulation skills required for independent study (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, & Blomeyer, 2004). Moreover, those students most in need of credit recovery—those in urban environments and those living in poverty—often do not have access to technology, or they attend schools with poor technology infrastructure, making online learning frustrating and impractical. Students are therefore more likely to drop out from and fail online courses than they are from traditional face-to-face courses (Roblyer, 2006).

Hybrid courses—that is, online courses that include in-person interactions—lead to greater academic success and student retention (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). As a result, students who require credit recovery in order to graduate and who attempt to get back on track academically through an online intervention appear to experience higher levels of success in a blended environment. Also, as Cavanaugh et al. (2004) noted, “online learning has the unique capability for immersing students in information and communication technologies (ICT) beyond the traditional classroom.” Developing ICT skills is especially important for students who do not have regular and meaningful access to learning opportunities that integrate technology in their traditional classrooms.

### **Credit Recovery in Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs**

Afterschool and summer learning programs supported by 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding are especially well-suited for online, asynchronous credit-recovery efforts. These programs typically employ a variety of innovative instructional techniques, offering a nontraditional approach to student learning that differs from regular school-day instruction and that incorporates a specific emphasis on youth development. In the particular case of credit recovery programs offered by 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other similar afterschool and summer programs funded by other sources, the youth development focus includes helping students set and achieve academic goals, developing students’ confidence in their ability to acquire credits and progress to graduation (self-efficacy beliefs), and also developing and refining students’ self-regulation skills required for independent study.

Successful 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool and summer programs, as well as other similar afterschool and summer programs, typically employ alternative systems to monitor student behavior, progress, and achievement. They also seek to provide curricula and activities that are relevant, enjoyable, and flexible, especially with regard to high school students. Notably, afterschool and summer learning programs that offer credit recovery are essentially asking students to engage in academic activities during their free time, in the same disciplines in which these students have experienced failure. This creates a significant challenge; however, it is the *nontraditional* nature of 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool and summer programs that enables them to attract and retain students.

By jettisoning typical barriers to student achievement, online credit recovery learning management systems allow students to interact directly with the instructional content. For example, the content of the course and the pace of the instructor are not controlled by the teacher, but by the student. Students can therefore progress at their own pace, without the teacher as gatekeeper. The student can also repeat sections of content, test out of others, and avoid the issues that often arise in classrooms related to management and discipline. Also, these afterschool and summer programs empower students to take control of their own learning. Unlike regular school-day programs, afterschool and summer programs are voluntary. Students can opt out, and this power gives the students a sense of agency—another important program goal for high school students.

In short, as a result of their innovative practices and nontraditional approaches, 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool and summer programs are especially well suited for technologically-mediated credit recovery because (1) they are attended by students who are voluntarily present, (2) they are staffed by professionals who bring a youth-development (rather than a narrow, academically-focused) approach to student progress, and (3) they do not replicate the structures and oversight mechanisms of traditional day school programs.

### **Examples From the Field**

In light of mounting national urgency to increase graduation rates and reduce dropout rates, education practitioners and advocates alike are giving increased attention to the potential of afterschool and summer learning programs to provide additional resources and supports needed by students who are at-risk of dropping out. The following programs explicitly target potential dropouts with a set of focused strategies, including credit recovery, aimed at helping these students alter their trajectory so that they achieve success in school and persist until they graduate.

Fordham University's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is conducted on the university campus after school and during the summer and is designed explicitly to provide opportunities and supports for credit recovery for at-risk high school students. The program uses an online learning management system, PLATO, to help students earn credits in academic subjects and make progress toward graduation. Supported by licensed teachers and Fordham University undergraduate mentors, as well as a licensed social worker, participants receive one-on-one guidance in note taking, Internet research, and study skills. Students are also invited to visit university events and college classes and to eat dinner regularly in the campus cafeteria with their undergraduate mentors. Parents and adult family members of participating students

can take free classes in workforce development, technology, and English skills, and they can take other workshops provided through partnerships with local community-based organizations. Over the course of the latest reporting period, 250 students recovered 539 high school credits. Of the 256 students enrolled during the 2010–11 academic year, 175 (68%) earned a total of 346.5 credits. Of the 134 students enrolled for credit recovery during the summer leading up to the 2010–11 school year, 106 (79%) earned a total of 192 credits (New York State Dept. of Education, 2011).

The Seminole County (Florida) Public Schools Midway Safe Harbor Center operates the “Last Best Chance” program—a credit-recovery initiative that engages highly qualified teachers and tutors to provide intensive intervention to students who are at risk of dropping out of school because of low performance and repeated behavioral reprimands. Students are also matched with community mentors to promote positive relationships and continuous support for academic success. Moreover, the initiative includes a character education component, designed to foster cooperation and communication with others. Activities focus on the development of appropriate verbal skills that enable participants to effectively communicate needs without verbal aggression or bullying.

Habitat for Humanity of North Idaho and Post Falls High School have combined to create a cooperative apprenticeship program called Learn to Earn in Hayden, Idaho. Students get hands-on experience and earn school credits by working on Habitat for Humanity construction sites. Students pick up skills in all phases of a construction project, are able to apply their work experience toward earning their diploma, and make contacts in the construction field with the potential for employment after graduation (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

Students in need of credit recovery at Blair High School in Pasadena, California, have found success through the BlairLEARNS program. The grades 7–12 school offers a rich assortment of afterschool programs, from cutting-edge technology to sports to academic support and credit recovery. As a result, the school’s on-time graduation rate is up 28% since 2004. In 2007, more than a third of the graduating class participated in the credit recovery program (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

## Recommendations

- **Strong partnerships with feeder schools/day program.** *A successful credit recovery program sponsored by community-based afterschool partners depends upon close collaboration with feeder schools. These partnerships will enable the afterschool credit recovery program to identify students who are struggling in the traditional classroom setting and who, in the judgment of teachers and counselors, can thrive in an afterschool program with an academic focus. Also, feeder programs can provide support for afterschool partners by encouraging students to persist in attending the afterschool program, by taking note of any positive effects that participation in credit recovery has on students’ current academic performance (like behavior and attendance), and perhaps most importantly, by ensuring that all requirements for credit have been completed.*
- **Flexible scheduling.** *Since afterschool credit recovery programs focus on adolescent learners, flexible scheduling is imperative. Especially for nontraditional high school students who may have children of their own, family responsibilities, or jobs, afterschool credit recovery programs need rolling enrollment and flexible policies for arrival and departure.*

- **Family involvement.** *Communication with the home is essential for afterschool programs, and credit recovery is no exception. Parents or caregivers must be informed about the importance of their child's recovering credits and progressing towards graduation. Family involvement includes communicating about attendance and academic progress, as well as celebrating success by notifying the family when a credit is recovered. Successful programs also offer courses for parents and adult family members in workforce development and technology.*
- **Ongoing staff development.** *Since many credit recovery programs in afterschool settings rely on learning management systems, staff development in technology is essential. Also, staff must learn new ways of interacting with students that differ distinctly from traditional relationships between teachers and students. The very presence of students in afterschool credit recovery programs is evidence that traditional school-based approaches have not been successful for these students, so alternative methods of instruction and interaction are needed. Each program will have somewhat different specific professional development needs; however, staff development around emerging cultural, technological, and instructional issues is imperative.*
- **Effective evaluation strategies.** *Tightly coupled with the need for ongoing staff development is the need for regular and systematic evaluation to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program. All constituent groups invested in the program should be part of the evaluation, including students, families, feeder school staff, and program staff. Importantly, the evaluation should include, if possible, assessment of the instructional environment of students' school-day classes so that program refinements can be made, based in part on those findings.*
- **Strong technological infrastructure.** *If the credit recovery program depends on technology, the technical infrastructure must be solid and reliable. Nothing will undermine a program's reputation among students faster than technology that does not work. This requires a commitment of funding and staff.*
- **Post-secondary focus.** *Experiences of post-high school life are essential motivating factors for academically at-risk high school students. Successful credit-recovery programs offer students support in post-secondary preparation and planning, including visits to colleges; assistance with college essays, applications, and financial aid forms; and sponsorship of workforce development workshops that improve interview skills and support resume writing.*
- **Youth development emphasis.** *Successful credit-recovery programs incorporate a youth development emphasis that essentially permeates the program culture. This helps students feel that staff members are invested in their future, provides authentic opportunities for student agency and leadership, and helps create and maintain meaningful relationships between staff and students. These relationships often take the form of mentoring by successful program completers or volunteers from local colleges and the community.*

## Conclusion

As a result of their innovative and nontraditional approaches to student learning—freed from the constraints of regular school day and school year programs—21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool and summer programs have been able to embrace credit recovery programs that are highly engaging for high school students who have struggled academically. These programs typically employ online learning management systems along with in-person support, and freed from the constraints of regular school-day and school-year programs, they allow students to accumulate credits at their own pace, thereby empowering them to take control of their learning.

As a result, credit recovery through engaging afterschool and summer learning programs, like those supported by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, offer many struggling high school students the opportunity to experience academic success, often for the first time—and these successes typically carry over into their regular school-day classes. This creates a major “win” for all stakeholders involved: the students and their families, their high schools and communities, and of course, these highly-innovative afterschool programs themselves.

## Additional Program Examples

The following examples are drawn from Afterschool Alliance Issue Brief #39: *Afterschool: Providing a Successful Route to Credit Attainment and Recovery* (August 2009).

- **Prep Zone** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is an innovative high school afterschool program that offers students the opportunity to earn credit during afterschool time for substantial projects that apply classroom learning to real-world situations. The program includes rigorous coursework, development of an entrepreneurial project and business plan, and culminates in levels of competitions where the students can win grants and computers.
- **EVOLUTIONS (EVoking Learning & Understanding Through Investigations of the Natural Sciences)**, is a free program at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, Connecticut, that serves underrepresented, inner city older youth. Students earn academic credit at their schools for participating in a program revolving around science career awareness/literacy, college preparation and transferable skills development. Students design and construct their own museum exhibition and produce DVDs that teach state science standards to elementary students. They also go on a 2- to 3-day college visitation trip and visit another museum in the region, all free of charge. One component of the program provides students with paid opportunities as trained interpreters of museum resources. The local school district provides free transportation in the form of free city bus passes, allowing for greater access by the students most in need.
- **Hallways to Learning** in Kewanee, Illinois, used the results of a student survey to design their program. Students indicated what their interests and goals were, and they now have the opportunity to participate in a cardio club, a jazz ensemble, a writing club, culture club, film club and book club. Woven throughout the curriculum is a credit retrieval program that helps students graduate with their peers.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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