Keeping students on a path to graduation

Early intervention and credit recovery programs are helping at-risk students achieve success

"College-ready" and "career-ready" are major buzzwords in the educational field these days, as President Obama's push to increase graduation rates gains traction. Educators have spent a great deal of time and energy deciphering what it means to make students college- and career-ready—but a significant portion of the conversation has focused on finding ways to keep kids in school in the first place.

Early intervention and credit recovery programs can pave the way for students to remain on the road to graduation, and a growing number of school systems are turning to online options for delivering these services.

"My members have been having conversations about the fact that, before we can talk about kids being college- and career-ready, we have to reduce dropout rates [and] increase our graduation rates," says Brenda Welburn, executive director of the National Association of State Boards of Education. "Many kids don't find school relevant, especially as they get older."

The challenge, she says, is not just to give lip service to the need for relevance, but to make the connection real for today's learners between the outside world and that of school.

Graduation, page 35

GIVE HER A POSSIBILITY, AND SHE'LL FIND A DIRECTION.

aventa LEARNING by K12

EVERY STUDENT IS UNIQUE. But as budget cuts increase and class sizes grow, helping students find their path to success is getting tougher. Aventa Learning can help. We partner with teachers and schools to meet the individual needs of students—from the student struggling to graduate to the student striving for more challenges. Aventa Learning is the leader in middle and high school online learning. We're far more than an Internet connection. We offer 140+ classes, including credit recovery and Advanced Placement® classes. With a staff of over 200 highly qualified instructors, we can be an invaluable resource for teachers and schools through curriculum and teaching support. Aventa Learning is now part of K12 Inc., the nation's leading provider of online learning for grades K-12.

To find out more, visit **aventalearning.com/possibility** or call **800.594.5504**

Graduation...

continued from page 33

Educators are determined to find that relevance by giving students more of the skills they'll need to succeed in a globally competitive economy—the so-called "21st-century skills" such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration—in addition to traditional skills such as reading and writing.

In the 2010 Speak Up survey from Project Tomorrow, a national survey of the attitudes and opinions of students, parents, teachers, and administrators toward education and technology, 38 percent of the nearly 15,000 K-12 school leaders who responded said that "integrating 21st-century skills into the curriculum" was the best way to improve student outcomes, particularly in terms of increasing college and career readiness. This was the second most popular response to the question, following 49 percent of administrators who believed the best way to improve student outcomes was by enhancing teacher effectiveness through professional development or professional learning communities.

Going hand-in-hand with developing students' 21st-century skills and making school relevant for today's learners is keeping them engaged in their education.

Today's students have gotten used to being "plugged in" and connected with technology nearly constantly when they are outside of school, whether through PCs and laptops, or gaming systems like the Nintendo DS or the Wii, or through phones and tablet computers—and their interest in school often lags when technology is not integrated into instruction.

"These kids matured in a digital world. They love technology, they have multiple devices that they manipulate seamlessly outside of school, but when they come to the classroom they're being asked to leave those devices at the door," says Melanie Pritchett, director of education policy for CompassLearning.

The 2010 Speak Up survey, in fact, found that just one-third of high school students agreed they are interested in what they're learning in school. Forty-seven percent said they wished their classes were more interesting, and just 27 percent said they were motivated to do well in school because they liked school.

These findings make it clear that engagement is a key factor in keeping kids in school: Unless students are engaged, they have nothing keeping them anchored in their education, because too many kids today don't see school as meeting their needs, explains Julie Evans, chief executive officer of Project Tomorrow.

Once students begin heading down the path of failure—whether it's because they don't believe school is relevant to them, or they've become bored, or they didn't understand the material—it can be difficult to reroute them and get them engaged again. And because course failure often leads to delinquency or other school failures, this can begin a trend that leads to dropping out of school.

When a student drops out, he or she has been failed by the education system; on the other hand, high school dropouts cost their school districts millions of dollars each year—and they cost society even more when you consider the amount of lost productivity and potential revenue they represent.

Fortunately, a number of programs exist that can intervene with students early on, or help them make up enough course credits to keep them on a path to graduation. In this special report, we'll look at how some K-12 districts are solving this challenge in their own schools.

Online credit recovery lets students retake only those portions of a course they didn't understand.

Online programs: A departure from what wasn't working before

Aventa Learning by K12 is an online credit recovery program designed to help students earn course credit toward high school graduation. The credit recovery courses are designed and created for students who have attempted yet failed to pass particular courses.

Aventa says it has seen a significant increase in the demand for online credit recovery programs over the past few years. This increase is being driven by a couple of factors, the company says.

For one thing, the old model for reaching at-risk students—providing summer school programs or after-school help, for example—wasn't working particularly well. Because the traditional classroom environment wasn't successful for the student the first time around, there's a good chance these methods won't work, either. Additionally, there's a certain stigma associated with attending a credit recovery class.

What's more, many students feel lost in overcrowded classrooms that might be moving at too fast a pace, or in the chaotic environment of large high schools. Because many students fail for contextual, rather than academic, reasons, Aventa says its credit recovery courses eliminate this negative influence on learning by delivering more personalized instruction in a quiet computer lab or library, or with headphones at a computer in the back of a classroom.

"A lot of district officials think this at-risk population of students needs a face-to-face, high-touch, structured environment," says Greg Levin, vice president of school services at K12 Inc. "But we're finding that that environment is part of what has led to their being in this situation in the first place. Giving them an environment where they can create their own schedule, when they're ready to learn, in some cases had kids complete their courses in a week or two, because they're engaged and their confidence is built from the first problem."

There is also a significant cost associated with summer school and other traditional credit recovery programs. "That, coupled with the budget crisis that is hurting every state at every level, and that is trickling down to the education budget, makes the traditional model one which … wasn't providing the results that districts want," says Levin.

When a student takes Aventa's online credit recovery classes, he or she is likely going to a computer lab or working on the class at home, rather than in a credit recovery class. "And chances are, you might be sitting next to an AP student who is taking Mandarin, so there's not as much stigma," says Levin.

Just because these students have previously failed the course they are retaking doesn't mean they didn't master at least some of the content. The Aventa program allows students to take an assessment to determine where their understanding of a particular topic

Graduation, page 38

How four districts have had success with credit recovery

Although the Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, Texas, has a strong early intervention program that is successful in keeping more kids from failing classes, the district still uses credit recovery as an element in its overall student graduation plans.

Students who have failed a course may take credit recovery with Aventa's online courses, or they may be required to retake a class in the traditional way. The choice is sometimes up to the student, but the teacher, the counselor, and the parents all have a voice in the decision. If a student simply missed too much of the course, he or she likely will be required to retake it in a traditional setting. But other students can benefit greatly from online credit recovery, says Sheri Alford, director of educational technology for Spring Branch ISD.

"We like it because it's a continuous enrollment," says Alford; students can begin taking the online course as soon as they're in trouble.

The district gives each student in an online credit recovery course a liaison—a teacher who can help when that student hits a snag. "The liaison is also the person who says, 'I notice you didn't log in yesterday,' or, 'You were only online for so long, and you're not progressing.' So the liaison can provide one-to-one help," Alford says.

The liaison also sets up tutorials. For example, if the liaison is an English teacher and the student is struggling with a certain portion of an online math course, the liaison can set up a tutorial with a math teacher.

Alford says Aventa is far superior to a prior credit recovery program the district was using. That program, from another vendor, was not as rigorous, and students had figured out how to manipulate it without actually learning anything.

The Tucson Unified School District in Arizona is another district that is offering online credit recovery to students. If a student is a junior or senior, has failed a class, and needs those credits to graduate, the student is eligible to take an online credit recovery course free of charge.

Stuart Baker, Tucson USD's coordinator for online learning, likes the Aventa program because the focus is on the skills a student learns, not on the amount of time he or she spends on the class. Additionally, Baker says, the speed at which a student learns is entirely up to the student, not up to the online class.

"For a regular comprehensive high school trying to set up something based on how slow or fast kids learn, it would be a nightmare. Semesters would have to begin and end at all different times; it just can't work," Baker says. "But in an online situation, it's much easier to handle" this kind of personalization.

Tucson USD requires students to log in for at least five hours per week, per class. Students have two months to get through a credit recovery class, though some get through the courses much faster.

Baker points out that the personnel costs don't go down significantly with online courses, because you still need teachers, administrators, and counselors involved. But when you balance those costs against the cost of a senior taking up a seat in algebra that a freshman could take in the fall, then online credit recovery often becomes worth it.

"When you're talking about credit recovery and today's student, who wants information in a variety of different ways, the more flexible you can be, the better," Baker says.

Baker says there has been a real revolution in how colleges are delivering classes, offering more flexible schedules with evening classes, online classes, and even weekend classes.

Spring Branch ISD in Houston, Texas, gives each student in an online credit recovery course a liaison—a teacher who can help when that student hits a snag.

"High school hasn't really caught up with that idea," he says. "Part of that is, what do you do with a 14-year-old kid who doesn't have to go to school all day? There remains the idea of schools being able to watch the kid. Still, we're stuck with the ideal of how we've done schools for the last 100 years. We need to start redefining how we present information, how we can draw on a variety of sources."

John Glenewinkel, superintendent of the East Valley School District in Spokane, Wash., seems to have embraced the idea of flexibility in moving more students toward graduation. He has put a number of programs into place to serve students whom he calls "truly displaced and nontraditional learners."

For example, the district has recently begun working with the Hutterite community. The Hutterites are very self-sufficient and community-oriented, and they are committed to education, but their children become adults at about age 15, and they have not had much of a desire or a need for a high school education. The community has begun to recognize that their children need more educational opportunities—yet their culture does not support their children being integrated into high schools, which means that very few Hutterite children in the area ever earn a high school diploma.

Working with the community, the East Valley School District pays for a portion of the salary of a high school teacher for the Hutterite community (the Hutterites pay for the other part). The Hutterites do have a school building equipped with computers, and high school students can go to that building, where they can take online learning classes. "By using our shared teacher, online learning, and our assessments and curricula, we are basically operating a K12 school there. And students are actually graduating," says Glenewinkel.

Glenewinkel admits there is still much to be done around the effort. "One of the things we really need to be able to do is increase the career and technical education programs, particularly around animal science and agriculture. We're striving to do that while at the same time working to deliver the computer-based instruction. So it's a work in progress, but everyone appears to be very pleased."

Another program from the East Valley School District is a blended learning program with the Squaxin Indian nation. "We have a teacher, and we're working with students who have been displaced from school because their culture doesn't support traditional high school," Glenewinkel says.

The Squaxin have a long history of fishing and being connected to the land, so they need flexibility to engage in these activities. By giving them a chance to work out of the tribal center via distance learning, Glenewinkel has provided a program for students who might have started high school but found that the cultural differences were too vast to be overcome. "We monitor the program to make sure that the learning is at the right level, and we can modify the learning to make it culturally relevant," he says.

Another program works during an unusual midwinter break that comes in February. During the week off, students who are struggling in a class or who have failed a class can come to school for an intensive program to make up credits. The program is personalized for each student; a plan is put together, a teacher is made available, and the student can work online to accomplish what he or she needs to make up the credits.

"They have a very specific learning plan," Glenewinkel said of program participants. "We don't want them to go through this week and not get it done. It's the completion of the plan we're aiming for, whether they finish it in the week, or complete most of it during the week and then finish through the following weeks."

Glenewinkel also has implemented a system whereby the principal and counselors of each school

Success, page 38

JUST BECAUSE HE MOVES TO A DIFFERENT BEAT, DOESN'T MEAN HE SHOULDN'T GRADUATE.

aventa LEARNING by K12

EVERY STUDENT DESERVES A CHANCE. Every school day, about 7,000 students drop out of school—a total of 1.2 million each year. Only 70% of entering high school freshman graduate every year. Aventa Learning offers real hope. In 2010, our programs helped 26,000 at-risk students get back on track to graduation. Aventa offers 140+ middle and high school courses, including credit recovery options, and we have over 200 highly qualified teachers on staff. Aventa Learning is now part of K12 Inc., the nation's leading provider of online learning for grades K-12.

To find out more, visit **aventalearning.com/chance** or call **800.594.5504**

Source: www.whitehouse.gov

Graduation...

continued from page 35

broke down; they are not required to retake the entire class, but only those portions in which they failed to demonstrate mastery of the subject, which means they can complete the course more quickly—without getting bored or turned off because they are repeating material they already know.

Aventa credit recovery courses also are designed with simpler, more accessible reading levels to aid in students' learning and mastery of the material. If Algebra I is considered a ninth-grade course, then the reading level for the Aventa Algebra I course is at a seventh or eighth grade level, explains Levin.

Before each unit, vocabulary is pre-taught. Additionally, if a student is having trouble reading the material, he or she can choose text-to-speech audio.

Much of the content is taught through non-textual activities, such as games and drag-and-drop activities. "We want to grab a student's attention through engagement. We want [the student] to be an active learner, so almost from the first page, there's some type of interactive activity for [students] to complete," Levin says.

All Aventa courses are delivered online, supported by a certified Aventa teacher and, in many cases, by an on-site mentor within the school itself. Additionally, an Aventa teacher helpline is available from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern time. Courses can be taken from anywhere, at any time, as long as a student has internet access; giving students this kind of authority over their learning can be incredibly empowering and motivational, Aventa says.

Because there is such a large bank of questions connected to each course, a student can retake each assessment multiple times. If a student fails an assessment, he or she can go back through the course material related to that assessment and try again. Giving students multiple tries to pass reduces the possibility they will fail a credit recovery course.

CompassLearning is another company that provides online credit recovery programs. Students who are failing a course can receive course credit without repeating an entire year of school by working though the online courseware successfully.

When a student is working through a CompassLearning program and answering questions, the program doesn't just say, "That answer is incorrect," says the company's Pritchett. Instead, the program "takes [the student] through a critical mistakes framework, discusses why the answer was wrong, and helps guide the student back toward the correct answer, reviewing content and giving hints on where [students] might look again in order to come to the correct response."

Products such as these can be used for credit recovery, but also for online tutoring or for creating individualized programs for students. "Schools are using it when they do their benchmark assessments, and if they find students are having trouble with particular concepts, they can provide tutorials and pull together individualized learning paths," Pritchett says.

Unless students are engaged, they have nothing keeping them anchored in their education, because too many kids today don't see school as meeting their needs, says Julie Evans, CEO of the nonprofit group Project Tomorrow.

Other innovative approaches to keeping students on track

Such frequent benchmark assessments are important for keeping students on the path to graduation.

The Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, Texas, implements Response to Intervention plans to keep students moving forward at an appropriate pace. Every six weeks or so, all students take benchmark exams in their classes. A school improvement specialist looks at the data and identifies students who are at risk of failing the class. Those students are put into smaller classes with a teacher who tutors them on the objectives that they missed. This intervention program is designed to help students succeed by ensuring that they get back on track before they fall too far behind.

Another program at Spring Branch that aims to keep students engaged is the district's 21st-century learning initiative. This program is designed to equip every classroom with relevant technology, based on its needs and the content being taught in that class. For example, an Xbox 360 Connect was put into gymnasiums for use during physical education.

"We look at the grade level, the content, and what each teacher needs to engage students in the curriculum and to keep kids from needing this intervention or credit recovery," says Sheri Alford, director of educational technology for Spring Branch ISD.

Alford emphasizes that all decisions about what technology is needed in each classroom are made in conjunction with content directors. The project also includes a redesign of the curriculum so that teachers incorporate the technology into what students are learning in ways that make sense, rather than having the teachers try to slot the technology into their existing classroom practices or schedule.

For its part, the National Association of State Boards of Education is building two projects designed to keep students engaged and on the road to graduation.

NASBE noticed that, statistically speaking, students in the Junior ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corp) had better attendance rates and participation in school, as well as higher graduation rates, and they seemed more ready for life after high school. So the organization has teamed up with the U.S. Army to create a brand-new high school program, called Project PASS (Partnership for All Student Success).

Project PASS combines tutoring, mentoring, summer school programs, and older students working with younger students to keep them on track. The program is all about leadership and citizenship, and it focuses on topics such as how to engage with adults and how to be a part of a community. Program participants meet at certain assigned times during school, as well as in after-school programs.

"It's part of their structured schedule," explains Welburn. "It will also include summer programs."

Partners such as 100 Black Men of America and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America have signed on and are figuring out how they will work with Project PASS moving forward. Groups within the business community also are coming aboard by offering students sum-

Graduation, page 39

Success...

continued from page 36

sit down with a list of all students and look at where each student should be at benchmark moments. For example, he says, if a student needs 24 credits to graduate, then students should have 12 credits at the end of their sophomore year. If a student doesn't have these 12 credits, the principal and counselors come up with any necessary interventions, either in class or online, to get that child back on track.

It's too early to see the results of these programs at East Valley, which have been rolled out slowly over the last two years, just yet. But Glenewinkel believes he will see graduation rates improve this year. Beyond graduation rates, he believes the programs are working, because the district has seen significant increases in the number of students wishing to take AP classes. "We're seeing this academic success carry over in some unexpected ways," he says.

Glenewinkel stresses that the district is "very, very cognizant" of the need to make sure that what is provided to students is of high quality.

"We're not interested in just creating a credit mill," he says. "We could give a kid all the credits we wanted, but if [the student] didn't meet assessment mandates, [he or she] wouldn't graduate. We believe we're offering a high-quality program, as well as individualized programs students can tailor to their needs."

While East Valley is still waiting to see the results of its intervention programs, Chicago Public Schools has seen great success in helping students recover credits lost as a result of failing a class. Beginning with a small pilot program in 11 schools, the district offered the Aventa program to at-risk youth in 2008. By 2010, more than 3,500 students had enrolled in credit recovery courses. And in those courses, more than 80 percent of students passed.

This helped ensure graduation for more than 1,000 at-risk students in the spring of 2010, says Robin Gonzalez, manager of distance education for the district. eSN

Graduation...

continued from page 38

mer jobs and showing them what types of careers are available to them.

A similar program, called the Junior Leadership Corp, has been created for middle school students as well, says Welburn.

"Students who drop out have usually already made that decision in middle school and are just waiting until they're old enough. So, we wanted to capture them at the middle school level," she explains.

The PASS program is brand new, but already Welburn is thrilled about the student response. "They're excited, they're volunteering in their communities," she says.

Project PASS will have its national launch on March 11. It is currently being implemented on a pilot basis at five schools in Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, and Kansas. After the national launch, NASBE will encourage other states to follow the model or to become PASS sites on their own.

No single solution is enough

Credit recovery programs such as those from Aventa and CompassLearning, and intervention programs such as those enacted at Spring Branch ISD and being put into place by NASBE, are useful in part because they can be implemented during the school year.

Summer school can be a challenge for schools to implement, not to mention unpopular from a student's standpoint.

"Trying to run a summer school class is difficult. You don't really know that you're going to be able to fill a class until the end of the semester. Or, you know that you have enough to fill the class, but you don't know how many students are actually going to take advantage of it," says Stuart Baker, the coordinator for online learning at Tucson Unified School District. "You don't know how many students are going to do it this summer rather than next, or whether they'll switch to a charter school. Parents are setting up their vacation plans, they've got their tickets and schedules locked in. From a student and parent's point of view, credit recovery online, during the school year, is more flexible."

Still, some believe that summer programs remain critical to today's youth and should not be ignored.

States and school systems are very concerned about their budgets, and many are deciding that summer school can be sacrificed—but that's not always a good answer, Welburn says: "If we're losing summer enrichment, summer learning, we're doing a disservice to kids. We know that kids in the lower income bracket have a higher percentage of learning loss during the summer months. If a little guy comes to elementary school already with a limited vocabulary because [he's] not using English at home, and then he loses a significant amount of learning over the summer months, that child could be two grades behind by the time the next school year begins."

Math is in particular need of summer enrichment programs, Welburn says.

"We do well with reading. We give kids summer reading lists, but we do nothing with math," she points out.

The bottom line is that, as with nearly every issue in the education field, there is no single answer to keeping students engaged, in school, and on the path to graduation. Rather, it is the schools that combine a variety of solutions—from early intervention and credit recovery, to strong summer enrichment programs and innovative whole-student approaches—that are most likely to bring the highest number of college- and career-ready students to the podium to receive their diplomas. eSN

Former First Lady Laura Bush announces new graduation initiative

Program seeks to put students on a path to graduation by focusing on the middle school years

From staff and wire reports

The George W. Bush Institute has introduced its second big education initiative, a program that seeks to improve graduation rates by focusing on middle schools.

Former first lady Laura Bush announced the initiative, called "Middle School Matters," at Stovall Middle School in the Aldine Independent School District on Feb. 9. She said research has shown that middle school—and sixth through eighth grade in particular—is a crucial time in determining future success.

"We know now from research that a lot of kids that drop out in high school really drop out in middle school. They just leave in high school," she said. "One of the goals will be making sure they are prepared for high school."

For the program, the institute has compiled research done by various institutions on what determines success in middle schools and plans to take that information and work with middle schools to implement new practices.

The program focuses on 11 elements for success, including school leadership, reading interventions, effective teachers, dropout prevention, and school, student, family, and community support.

The Bush Institute's research team has come up with specific measures that can be taken in the classroom to improve performance in all of these elements.

"Within each area, researchers are coming up with principles and practices to implement," said Kerri Briggs, the Bush Institute's director of education reform.

For example, the institute said, dropout preventions could include assigning adult advocates to meet regularly with students at risk of dropping out. Those advocates also could greet students as they arrive, meet with students to review grades and assignments, and regularly talk with the student's parents.

The research team is working to make sure all the components of the program are in place. They plan by the 2012-13 school year to implement the program in 10 to 15 schools. And then, making adjustments in the program from what they've learned, they will add more schools in the 2014-15 school year.

"We've got a lot of good feedback so far," Briggs said. "We think there's an appetite for this."

She said the program brings "an integrated, holistic approach," adding that many schools are facing a budget crunch and are mindful of costs.

"Middle school is such a time of transition," Briggs said. "Lots of things are going on with them. It's those middle school years that we think are foundational to success in high school."

The Alliance for Excellent Education, a policy institute, says nearly one-third of students—about 1.3 million each year—leave high school without a diploma.

Wanda Bamberg, superintendent of the Aldine school district, who helped develop the program, said she would like at least one of her middle schools to participate.

She said it would be a good opportunity for teachers and school officials to get guidance from researchers from around the country.

Former First Lady Laura Bush

"They will actually have people come into the schools and work with staff, and that's an opportunity," she said. "When people are trying to improve, they really do value those opportunities."

Andrea Prejean, deputy director of education policy and practice for the National Education Association, a teachers' union with 3 million members, notes that there are many "outside fixer" groups focusing on education that incorporate research.

She said there is a lot of good research out there and that the key to interventions is making sure educators are part of the process.

"Certainly we welcome any group that wants to join us in making sure that every student has a great public school," she said.

Noting that there are no "quick fixes," she said it takes at least five years to determine whether an intervention has been effective.

The Bush Institute is part of the George W. Bush Presidential Center, which also will include a presidential library and is set to be completed in 2013 on the campus of Southern Methodist University.

The institute, which is already up and running, focuses on education reform, global health, human freedom, and economic growth.

Last year, the institute unveiled its first big education initiative, which focuses on improving the performance of school principals.

The institute's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership, or AREL, will consist of school districts, universities, and foundations offering educational programs to current and future school leaders.

Initial funding for the Bush Institute's middle school project comes from a $500,000 donation from the Meadows Foundation. eSN

K12 IS STRENGTHENING THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING OPTIONS

How? Through K12's experience delivering two million online courses, an investment of $140 million in our curriculum, and our decade-long track record of success as America's #1 trusted provider of K–12 online learning. K12's web-based, fully hosted options range from supplemental courses, to blended online/classroom solutions, to full-time, turnkey online school programs—each with as much support as you need. Bring us your biggest challenges, as schools in most states and D.C. have done. We're ready to partner with you to **strengthen the promise.**

Please call us: 866.912.8589
Or e-mail: partnerships@K12.com
Visit us at: K12.com/educators