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Credit/Skills Recovery Pilot Project: Documentation Report for the Boston Public Schools

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CREDIT/SKILLS RECOVERY PILOT PROJECT

Documentation Report for The Boston Public Schools

January 2010

By Terry Grobe and Bedelia Richards, with Cheryl Almeida

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Terry Grobe, a program director on JFF's New Pathways to Postsecondary team, works with city and state initiatives directed at improving outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth. She leads JFF's work with the U.S. Department of Labor's Multiple Education Pathways Blueprint Initiative, a seven-city venture to grow new education options and raise high school graduation rates in these communities. She is also involved in an initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop postsecondary pathways for older youth. Ms. Grobe has a long history of professional experience in high school reform, alternative education, and youth systems development.

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ABOUT JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future identifies, develops, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In over 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

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PART I: OVERVIEW

In support of Boston Superintendent Carol Johnson's Acceleration Agenda and call for "graduation for all," the Boston Public Schools launched a pilot Credit/Skills Recovery Program in the summer of 2008. The pilot targeted a population of young people—18 years and older—who were one to four courses short of graduation and sought to help them gain needed credits to graduate and build career and college success skills. An analysis conducted by BPS with the Parthenon Group had identified this group—youth who are "old and close to graduation"—as being at high risk of dropping out of high school. To reach this group, the district implemented the pilot with the intent of providing students with another opportunity to earn credits toward their diplomas, while also surfacing practices that could inform the design of a similar program to be expanded and offered during the regular school year.

THE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

Jobs for the Future, in partnership with the BPS Office of High School Support, was invited to conduct documentation of the summer's pilot Credit/Skills Recovery Program. This effort was designed to assist BPS in indentifying operational questions, assessing the pilot's initial successes and issues, and drawing implications to inform possible expansion to more schools and students. The documentation work, which involved observations, interviews, and review of relevant documents, sought to explore three key questions:

- Was the target group well served by the program?
- Did the design elements help the target group persist in and complete coursework?
- Did students have sufficient support to stay engaged in the summer program, graduate, and make plans to transition to postsecondary education?

JFF staff members visited the Credit/Skills Recovery sites and interviewed teachers, guidance counselors, students, and staff from community-based agency partners. They also interviewed central office staff with direct responsibility for the pilot's planning or administration and attended one of the weekly meetings that brought together staff from all participating community agencies.

As the pilot was a lead effort in the superintendent's overall strategy to raise achievement and persistence rates within the district, all partners agreed that it was important to get a quick perspective on what was working well (or not). This feedback would enable the district to strengthen early implementation, the program design and a future scale up strategy if warranted.

CONTEXT FOR AND GENESIS OF THE PILOT PROGRAM

Credit recovery is a centerpiece of Superintendent Johnson's Acceleration Agenda. The first principle of this agenda—graduation for all—calls for the development of innovative programs and new school models for struggling students, with a first emphasis on credit recovery programs for those close to graduation. The need for this programming was evident early in Dr. Johnson's tenure with the release of the Parthenon Group study. A follow-up series of listening sessions developed by BPS for community partners, students, and parents, as well as reports issued by the city's Youth Transitions Task Force, also raised concerns about this "old and close to graduation" group of youth.

Using funds set aside from the general purposes budget and from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Dr. Johnson initiated quick action to launch the summer pilot. The decision generated

excitement and energy among staff, students, families, community partners, and other stakeholders.

PILOT PROGRAM DESIGN

The BPS Credit/Skills Recovery Program was designed to address the old-and-close segment of the potential dropout population. Students were eligible to participate if they were 18 years or older, had passed the MCAS (Massachusetts' statewide high school exit exam), and were one to four courses shy of graduation.

The pilot operated at five sites: four high schools and one alternative high school. With a first look at the data on the old-and-close cohort, BPS administrators identified 400 potential candidates for the pilot. After extensive review with school personnel working with these students, the list was narrowed to a cohort of 131.

The program design included three components: computer-based instruction; college readiness skills development; and transition planning and assistance. To ensure high quality for the pilot, each site had staff from both the school district and community-based organization partners (selected through an RFP process). Staff had explicit and complementary roles: teachers assisted young people with content and study skills; guidance counselors helped with transcript management; and CBO staff partners provided case management, counseling, and transition assistance.

BPS also used the summer effort to pilot four computer-based instructional systems: Novanet; Plato; EPIC; and SkillsTutor. Using an assessment rubric and a review process, BPS staff planned to review the various computer-based instructional systems, adopting and using the most effective ones for future programming.

PART II: PROGRAM OUTCOMES

One-hundred-thirty-one youth enrolled in the program across the five sites. While enrollees included students who required up to four courses to graduate, two-thirds of the participating students needed to complete only one or two courses to earn a diploma *(see Table 1)*.

During the pilot, 80 students (62 percent) completed their coursework and graduated. Young people who required only one or two courses to graduate had the highest success rates, with completion rates of 76 percent and 68 percent, respectively *(see Table 2)*.

Combined, 73 percent of the students who entered the program one or two courses short of graduation completed the coursework and earned their diplomas.

The completion rates for students who required three or four courses were considerably lower. Even so, one-third of the students finished the coursework and went on to graduate. It is likely that students requiring more than two courses to graduate needed more time than the six-week period allowed by the pilot.

Perhaps the most significant result of the pilot was its recuperative power. The Parthenon Group study, which identified old-and-close-to-graduation youth as being at significant risk of dropping out, found that this group had less than a 50/50 chance of graduating; their overall graduation rate was 48 percent. Had such a recovery program been in place and recaptured and graduated an additional 80 young people, the graduation rate for that particular cohort would have increased from 48 to 57 percent.

Accomplishing this degree of improvement during a pilot provides strong evidence of the promise and potential widespread impact of a credit recovery program.

In our recommendations, we discuss the implications of this data for future programming targeting this population of young people.

Table 1

Number of Students Enrolled, by Number of Courses Needed to Graduate

Number of Courses Needed	Number of Students	Percentage of Enrollees
1	51	39%
2	37	28%
3	27	21%
4	15	12%

Table 2

Completion Rates by Number of Courses Needed to Graduate

Number of Courses Needed to Graduate	Percentage Students Completing
1 course	76%
2 courses	68%
3 courses	37%
4 courses	37%

PART III: PROGRAM SUCCESSES

THE PILOT PROGRAM INTEGRATED MULTIPLE GOALS WITHIN ITS DESIGN.

The district developed a design for the pilot that was highly responsive to the multiple needs of this population of young people. The design sought to balance three key components: credit recovery (with major use of a computer-based instructional design and an eye on quality and rigor); skills development (specific skills related to postsecondary readiness); and transition planning (to ensure students were on a path to pursue higher education after high school). Program designers—a highly collaborative group of internal BPS partners that included staff from High School Support, Alternative Education, Unified Student Services, Extended Learning Services, Family and Student Engagement, the Office of Instructional and Information Technology, Budget and Curriculum and Instruction—acknowledged that this population needed far more than an on-line credit recovery opportunity. These young people also needed to make a strong postsecondary transition in order to succeed in the city's high skills economy. It is highly commendable that BPS district staff recognized and designed the pilot with key developmental goals in mind.

> "My case manager has helped me with college and a job, and motivated me to be here."
> *–Student*

Computer-based instruction was the core of the recovery strategy, and there was widespread support for its use among students, teachers, and other staff members. At the same time, staff found that "high touch" teacher-based supports, such as help with difficult content and coaching on study skills, were important supplements to technology-based coursework. Computer-based instruction drew on students' strengths and fostered self-directed learning. The flexibility of the program appealed to students and allowed each to learn at his or her own pace.

Overall, teachers, staff, and students reported that the software programs provided rigorous instruction. The content and questions embedded in the units required students to do a good amount of "higher order" thinking (e.g., analyzing content and basing decisions on analyses, judging what is most important, synthesizing content and ideas), often more than students reported they were accustomed to doing.

THE PILOT HAD STRONG AND EFFECTIVE STAFF.

Strong staffing was critical to the pilot's success. By leveraging the specific expertise of teachers, guidance counselors, and community-based organizations, adults played complementary roles that fostered a collaborative community focused on student success. Program staff showed a powerful commitment to struggling students. The use of community-based organization partners enabled those with neighborhood roots to provide youth additional support, especially case management services and transition services. Teachers reported that guidance counselors were needed to resolve transcript issues and to get students the right information about which classes they needed to take. In most instances, program staff recognized that the roles of the teacher, guidance counselor, and CBO partners were valuable and interdependent.

THE USE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION PARTNERS PROVIDED NEEDED SUPPORTS.

Community-based organizations helped to foster a sense of accountability among students. They were in constant communication with young people–assessing their needs, probing to see whether they were facing difficulties that hindered their participation in the program, and helping to resolve issues as they arose. Their skill at developing relationships with students was an asset, especially for students who were motivated but lacked confidence or simply found it difficult to seek out help for particular issues. CBO partners also increased on-site attendance and time-on-task by regularly calling students and building trust and rapport with them and their families. Teachers reported that CBO partners were instrumental in supporting students and recognized that the extra support boosted attendance and overall success rates.

CBO partners gave teachers a window into the lives of their students. This additional understanding of young people and their particular burdens helped teachers build even more sensitivity and commitment to the success of these youth. Teachers reported considerable pride in their students.

"This is a good vehicle for learning. Young people are comfortable with technology, yet still ask important questions: Why is this the answer? How come I got this right?"
–Case Manager

"He helps everyone out on every single subject and helps us start getting into college."
–Student

"They really are very focused and they work on their coursework on their own time."*–Teacher*

"I've seen that students do have a strong will. Some really want it, and they work hard to do the work."*–Teacher*

"I can really focus on the work. But at the same time, the program is informal and you can talk to a friend or work with a partner on the coursework if you want to."
–Student

"It's cool how you do the pre-test and are able to focus just on the units where you need to learn the material. The program explains things very well so I can take good notes."
–Student

THE PROGRAM PROMOTED HIGH LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT.

High levels of student commitment to finish were reported in virtually all program sites. Students working on site were very engaged in working through units and finishing their coursework; there was little 'down time' during program hours. No behavior incidents occurred at any of the summer sites. CBO partners reported that "there is a lot of learning going on" and that "students are very engaged."

One teacher said that a real value computer-based instruction was that it encouraged students to be active and self-directed learners. Because of the individualized pacing and the informality of instruction, students also often worked together and supported one another's learning.

PART IV: CHALLENGES

Despite these encouraging results from the pilot, a number of challenges arose in meeting the multiple goals of credit recovery, skills development, and transition services.

STAFF VARIED ON WHETHER THE PROGRAM PROVIDED ENOUGH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.

Program staff were mixed about whether the pilot properly balanced credit recovery with the development of needed skills. Study skills (e.g., note taking) and college-ready skills (e.g., writing) may not have received as much emphasis as credit recovery or content acquisition. Because study skills and writing are important for college success, program planners may wish to describe explicitly the set of skills that constitute college readiness and provide guidance and tools for how these skills get incorporated into instruction.

THE PILOT DID NOT ALLOW ENOUGH TIME FOR TRANSITION PLANNING.

Postsecondary planning time was limited because staff focused on getting the program up and running, addressing and resolving operational issues, and ensuring that students completed the coursework in time for an August graduation. This short summer timeline, coupled with the sheer amount of coursework required of students, limited the ability of case managers to help students plan their transitions to postsecondary programs.

The quality and extent of planning varied across the sites. Some students had made specific plans and were beginning to work on college applications or financial aid. But in mid-August, when JFF conducted site visits, many students said they did not yet have transition plans.

SOFTWARE PROGRAMMING WAS NOT FULLY ADAPTED FOR SUMMER USE, AND NO ONE SYSTEM "HAD IT ALL."

The rapid planning and launch of the pilot led to start-up challenges with software programming, most of which were quickly resolved. For example, computers crashed on the first day, leaving some students to sit idle for hours. In addition, teachers were not always aware that they needed to download other programs from the Internet in order for the software to function properly.

Students rarely pointed to aspects of the software that they did not like, but some had clear ideas for what could be improved. For example, because the curriculum was not completely aligned with summer programming requirements, central office staff pared down content after the pilot was underway. As a result, some students said they were not sure if the material they had been working on would count toward completion of that particular course. Other students said that pre-tests and post-tests were not fully aligned with the content of units.

District staff reported that they learned valuable lessons about both products and implementation of software programs during the pilot phase. While all software providers had a strong system, each program had limitations in terms of how on-line learning was structured or delivered or how quickly units could be modified to meet coursework requirements. District staff developed a rubric at the outset to guide decisions on use of one or more software systems for future use. Staff will continue to test technology-based tools and in time develop a strategic plan for product use and implementation.

STUDENTS NEEDED MORE HELP WITH MATH AND SCIENCE COURSEWORK.

Another issue that emerged from both teachers and students across different sites was the need for content-specific expertise in the classrooms. As most of the teachers were English or social studies teachers, students had limited assistance with difficult math and science courses. Many students targeted by the pilot had previously struggled with these courses and reported needing more help, particularly with chemistry, physics and Algebra II. Teachers also noted that it was challenging to provide enough help in these subjects.

ELIGIBILITY AND TRANSCRIPT ISSUES PRESENTED PROBLEMS INITIALLY.

Teachers reported that some students identified for the pilot were not actually eligible. They were missing too many courses, were too young, or had not passed the MCAS. Fortunately, a central administrator was on board to double-check eligibility. Several staff said the pilot's quick launch may have resulted in limited time to communicate eligibility requirements to principals and guidance counselors. In the absence of an absolute understanding of the requirements, these staff probably erred on the side of giving the largest number of students a chance to participate.

Teachers reported numerous transcript problems. In many cases, transcripts were not correctly analyzed prior to startup, creating problems throughout the summer. Many students arrived at the sites not knowing what courses they needed to make up. A few students were assigned to the program who already had enough credits to have graduated on time. In other cases, students started working on courses they already had completed and had to switch to other courses midway through the program. Lack of readily available staff in the high schools during July and August hindered the ability of pilot staff to resolve transcript issues in a timely way.

LOCATIONS WERE NOT EQUALLY UTILIZED.

To accommodate as many students as possible, central office staff housed the pilot at multiple sites, rather than creating one location to which all students would travel. Each site was deemed to be inviting and convenient for students. However, they were not equally utilized. One centralized high school had the most participants. Other sites had fewer participants, either because students did not enroll there or because students were not attending in a consistent way. Very few students attended the single alternative-school site. Several CBO staff people said that there was not enough time for partners to craft a workable strategy or determine the best location for the alternative site. At least one CBO staff person said that young people did not consider the location of the alternative site to be "neutral territory"; hence, safety issues may have hindered recruitment.

SOME STUDENTS DID NOT ATTEND REGULARLY, AND SPORADIC ATTENDANCE REDUCED STUDENT SUCCESS.

At some sites, staff delivered a strong recruitment message about the flexibility of the program and the freedom for students to work on the software system in various locations and on their own time (in addition to on-site program time). Students may have misinterpreted this message, believing that the program was not as structured as it was intended to be; consequently, some programs struggled with day-to-day attendance. Many young people were not 'self-starters;' they needed the daily structure to persist and finish coursework. For these youth, sporadic attendance complicated their trajectories towards completion. Inconsistent attendance also meant that CBO staff had limited time to engage in effective transition planning.

IT WAS CHALLENGING FOR THE PROGRAMS TO BALANCE INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING WITH PERSONALIZATION.

Most staff agreed that computer-based programming requires students to take initiative and be self-directed learners, but planners knew that students with histories of course failure might find the methodology difficult. In fact, some students found it daunting. However, with the supports provided by teachers and staff, most students persevered within the individualized, self-paced structure.

Centralized sites with more students facilitated a positive peer-learning culture, with concomitant high levels of attendance and engagement among students. Smaller sites sometimes struggle to build community. Even so, one-on-one coaching and some peer support did take place in the smaller sites.

STUDENTS WITH MORE THAN TWO COURSES TO COMPLETE WERE LESS LIKELY TO FINISH.

Only a few students with three or four courses to complete finished during the summer term, although several highly motivated students did. In one interview, a young man revealed that he had been taking night courses for some time before he learned about the Credit/Skills Recovery Program. Three days before the program's official end, he was in terrific spirits, having finished four courses, and he was busily preparing for graduation and life beyond high school. Though a heartening example of perseverance, this story is atypical of students with more than two courses to recover.

PART V: RECOMMENDATIONS

The multiple stakeholders interviewed for this study gave the documentation team rich information about the many successes and challenges of the pilot. Most notable was the widespread enthusiasm for this new program Staff and stakeholders had a range of ideas for how to strengthen and improve the program and held views on how computer-based instruction could be better utilized to help more high school youth stay on track to graduation. These ideas were used to generate a set of recommendations for the growth and expansion of credit recovery programming in Boston. These recommendations are presented below.

PLANNING AND EARLY IMPLEMENTATION

- Compress course content for summer use to allow students to cover content and develop needed skills.

- Fully align course content with BPS standards and content requirements. Once the district chooses a single software provider, content can be more easily adjusted for summer or year-round use in helping youth recover credits.

- Use program-completion data to determine if the program should target youth with fewer courses to complete, or if different timing or strategies should be created for youth who need to recover more courses to finish.

- Identify eligible students earlier. This will allow more time for analyzing and tracking their actual course-recovery requirements and resolve any thorny transcript issues.

- Be clear with students about the actual time and on-site program commitments needed to finish coursework and make successful transitions to postsecondary education. Staff should stress at the outset of the summer program the value for students of putting in a good amount of time on the program site.

OPERATIONS

- Sustain and strengthen the school/community partnership model. Over time, involve these partners more directly in planning, program design, site decisions, and resource issues.

- Study student utilization patterns to determine the right mix and exact locations of sites for summer programs so that all sites have full staff teams and adequate supporting materials (e.g., texts).

- Tighten eligibility criteria for summer programming and distribute information in various formats to principals and guidance counselors well in advance of program start-up.

- Analyze recovery course needs in advance to determine teacher hiring priorities. Based on student needs, math and science teachers could be hired and deployed in one or two sites to provide assistance to students making up courses in these disciplines.

- Seek funding from municipal, state, and private sources to support and expand year-round credit recovery efforts in Boston.

PROGRAM AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

- Articulate a set of college- and career-readiness skills and provide tools and support to teachers and CBO staff for integrating these skills into program design, staffing roles, and instruction.

- Design a better mix of on-line learning and group-based activities. For example, a program could require students to attend special study-group sessions each week to further develop their writing, critical thinking, and study skills. This would also enable teachers to pinpoint and address students' specific problems, such as note-taking skills, and help build engagement for more vulnerable youth.

- Provide more and longer-term support for transition planning. This component needs to be strengthened within the current program design, with perhaps more assistance from guidance counselors to inform strategies currently used by CBO partners. This may necessitate a slightly longer program day or extended contracts to CBO providers for follow-up support.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Although the pilot phase lacked sufficient time, resources, and structure to ensure that all students had finalized postsecondary transition plans, it generated promising outcomes for the "old-and-close" group that it was targeted to serve, particularly those young people who had just one or two courses to complete for graduation. The pilot had a solid design and balanced a number of components: skills development, course recovery, support, and transition planning.

Perhaps most important, students prized the opportunity to enroll in the program and graduate nearly on time. Students rose to the occasion, showing levels of focus and motivation that surprised even long-time staff. This point was highlighted by two student speakers at graduation who recounted their past struggles as adjudicated and disengaged youth and then described the value of having a way to learn that was personalized, engaging, and supportive.

"Everyone was impressed with the intensity the kids brought to it—they saw this as their one shot to do it right and graduate."
—*Central Office Administrator*

Interviews with the many people involved in the pilot raise two additional considerations that warrant discussion as the district moves forward to sustain and/or expand this programming.

WHAT LESSONS DOES THE PILOT PROVIDE REGARDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING? HOW CAN THESE LESSONS INFORM SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGES IN HIGH SCHOOL INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES?

Because computer-based instruction helps and enables youth to be self-directed learners, it may be possible to incorporate a number of new on-line study opportunities for students to receive help with homework, master foundational skills, and participate in virtual study groups.

In a national study on the use of on-line learning tools in college, Carol Twigg of the National Center for Academic Transformation found that such opportunities can be an important complement to in-class learning. According to her report, Increasing Success for Underserved Students: Redesigning Introductory Courses, online learning allows students to master basic material and focus on group projects, study groups, and discussions in class. It will probably be valuable for district and school-based staff to think about expanding technology supported instructional practices and program designs.

SHOULD CREDIT RECOVERY PROGRAMMING BE USED IN EARLIER GRADES AS A TOOL TO GET OFF-TRACK STUDENTS BACK ON TRACK FOR GRADUATION?

The young people in this program had failed courses throughout their high school careers. The district might consider implementing earlier credit-recovery opportunities to help students get quickly back on track. Students would then enter their senior year with fewer (or no) additional courses to make up. BPS might also consider strategies such as granting "incomplete" grades to students who could, with additional support, master course material and pass a course within a few months of the end of the course. Alternatively, planners could differentiate these programs, offering a variety of classroom-based, after-school, or summer credit-recovery programming for all high school students to ensure that fewer students fall off track in the first place.

"I like this program very much. I think many of these kids wouldn't have returned to high school [next year] to finish coursework. They say they will and then life gets in the way."
—CBO Staff Person

"This is a great way to help them get their diplomas and not become dropouts."
—CBO Staff Person

PROGRAM STATUS UPDATE

In summer 2009, the Boston Public Schools doubled the number of youth served through summer credit recovery programming, graduating 130 young people in August. The district operated six summer sites, employing eight to ten teachers, two guidance staff (each half-time), and five community-based case managers during the eight-week program. Year Two costs included teacher and guidance staffs' hourly rate, the software contract, and contracts with five community agencies for case management and support services.

In Year Two, staff addressed many of the program design issues identified during the pilot phase. To offset the natural time constraints of summer programming, participating students were quickly connected to community-based case management services. This gave case managers the maximum time to work with young people on both program support and future planning.

Boston Public Schools staff also required community-based agencies to provide deliberate postsecondary planning services, such as formal information sessions and college visits. And BPS staff made sure that agency partners worked closely with organizations that provide college transition services. This enabled case managers to quickly connect their students with organizations that could help with all aspects of planning (including choosing a school or program, completing applications, and applying for financial aid forms or "last dollar" scholarships and grants).

As an additional intervention strategy for seniors, the district implemented an "academic year" credit recovery program. This gave seniors (identified in February) the ability to complete courses and graduate on time with their class. Students who met the criteria were enrolled in core content courses and provided 24/7 access and school lab based support to complete courses needed to graduate. In this way, seniors could also take advantage of transition services offered through their high schools. Year-round credit recovery was offered in 11 school sites this past year; as a result, 228 youth got back on track and graduated on time with their classmates.

Having recently received a private foundation grant to support and expand the program, the district is working with its partners to develop a comprehensive data analysis and evaluation component for the credit recovery program.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE