

# Recovering Course Credit Early in High School: What Works According to Students?

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## About This Research Brief

In 2018, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) launched a study to examine the effectiveness of online credit recovery.<sup>1</sup> The study focused on students who did not pass Algebra 1 or ninth-grade English (English 9) during their first year of high school and retook the course during the summer before their second year of high school. The study had two goals: (a) to determine if online credit recovery is an effective way to help students who experience academic struggles and (b) to describe the online instructional experience.

This research brief describes a follow-up study that focused on the perspectives or “voices” of students who successfully passed their credit recovery courses in summer 2022, immediately following the Algebra 1 or English 9 course they did not pass during their first year of high school. The study builds on recent work that values students’ perspectives and insights and centers student voice as an important component of educational research.<sup>2,3</sup>

This brief is the eighth in a series of research briefs produced by the [Online Credit Recovery Study](#). Previous briefs in the series focused on the original research study, which compared an online learning model for credit recovery with a teacher-directed credit recovery model.<sup>4</sup> Although that reporting included information about students’ instructional experiences in the credit recovery classes based on a student survey, we did not hear directly from students, in their own words, about their experiences.

## Key Findings

- For students who struggle to pass core courses early in their high school careers, success in a course can hinge on the interplay between instructional, relational, and nonacademic factors that shape students’ learning experiences.
- One key to unlocking student success is a student–teacher relationship that promotes interaction and one-on-one support.
- To facilitate student engagement and learning, credit recovery courses should provide students extended time to focus on course content, more opportunities for one-on-one student-to-teacher support, and instructional pacing and flexibility more aligned to students’ needs.

## Methods

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The present brief builds on AIR’s earlier work by bringing student voice into the conversation about credit recovery. By gathering original interview data, we sought to learn from students what they perceived caused them to not pass the course during their first attempt; how, if at all, credit recovery addressed factors that inhibited their learning; and whether they had any recommendations for how to improve credit recovery courses for future students. We interviewed 17 students<sup>5</sup> from nine high schools across Los Angeles, California, who did not pass Algebra 1 or English 9 in their first year of high school and took the credit recovery course to recover credit in summer 2022. Students were recruited from both courses (10 students for English 9 and seven students for Algebra 1) and course modalities (eight students took an online class and nine students took a teacher-directed class). Fifteen of the 17 students took the credit recovery course between their first and second years of high school.

Within 1 week after students completed the summer credit recovery course, we interviewed the 17 students about their experience in the course they initially did not pass, as well as in the credit recovery course. Approximately 4 months later (at the end of the fall 2022 semester), we conducted a second interview with 14 of the students to not only follow up on their academic progress but also confirm our understanding of what they reported in the first interview.

The following research questions guided our analysis:

- “What, if anything, do students in credit recovery think worked better for them in the credit recovery course than in the original course they did not pass? What did not work as well? Why?”
- “How, if at all, do students in credit recovery think they received the supports needed to address the factors that prevented them from passing the initially? What supports do they wish they had? Why?”

To respond to these questions, we developed semistructured interview protocols with questions that asked students to describe their experiences with both the original course and the credit recovery course. These questions included probes that touched on the following topics: the course modality of instruction and materials, students’ expectations for their courses, and their perceptions of support they received in their courses.

Two trained qualitative researchers coded the semistructured interview transcripts by item codes<sup>6</sup> and then summarized the findings across course subject and modality for contrast analysis. Although our analyses examined whether student responses differed depending on the course subject (Algebra 1 or English 9) or modality (online or teacher directed), we found that the themes were common across the different credit recovery classes. In the following sections, the results we report apply to students from all class types unless we specify otherwise.

# Student Experiences With Credit Recovery: The Developmental Context of Learning and Its Relational, Instructional, and Nonacademic Elements

Although past research has advocated for the study of schools as developmental contexts during adolescence,<sup>7</sup> showing that the student–teacher relationships that unfold carry implications for academic achievement and engagement,<sup>8,9,10</sup> this body of work has not yet been discussed in the context of credit recovery.

In addressing this opportunity for research, our analysis revealed that the student–teacher relationship was a critical factor for students who struggled to pass core academic courses. In speaking with students, it became clear that multiple factors influenced student engagement and classroom learning, and we grouped these factors into three categories. Two categories—instructional and relational factors—relate to the student–teacher relationship. The third category consists of nonacademic factors that lie outside the school context.

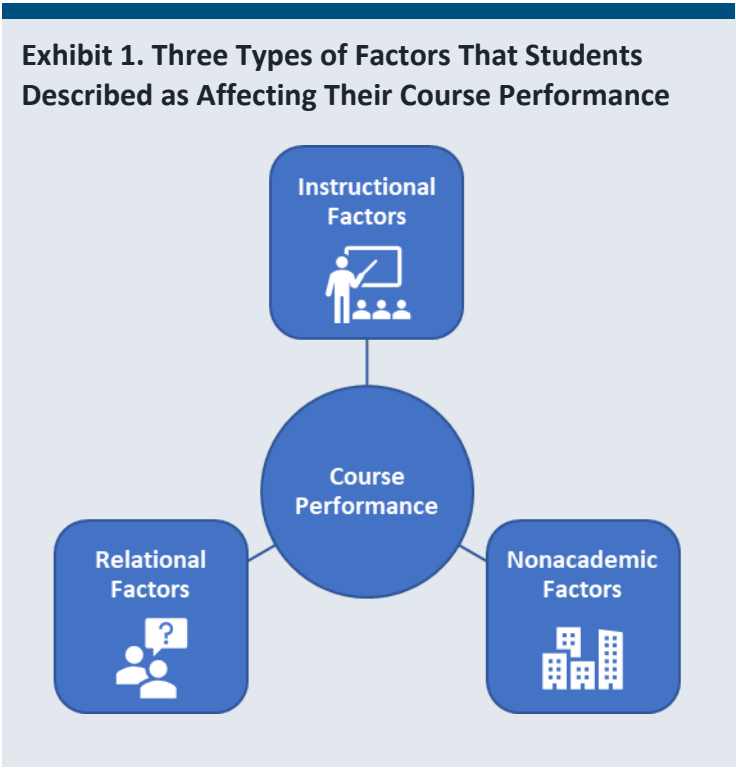
Even though we present these categories as distinct themes in this brief, the analysis also revealed that the factors often interacted to produce the experiences that students discussed during the interviews, as illustrated in Exhibit 1. Therefore, the findings presented in this brief should be read with the lens of understanding that they do not fall into completely discrete categories.

## Relational Factors

### Relational Factors That Inhibited Learning

When discussing why they did not pass their first Algebra 1 or English 9 course attempt, students shared that relational and interpersonal dynamics with the teacher were a factor.

**Students said poor rapport with teachers and perceived teacher disinterest in student well-being hindered their learning.** When asked questions about how teachers could do things differently, students overwhelmingly wanted their teachers to be more engaged with them. Most Algebra 1



students and a few English 9 students noted they wanted teachers to take a holistic interest in their success by asking them not only about their academic performance but also how they were doing generally. In addition, when reflecting on their original course attempt, students described wishing that teachers would have asked them questions about their learning and checked their comprehension; rather, students felt that poor communication in the student–teacher relationship contributed to them not passing the course. For example, when asked whether there were things that she wished the teacher would have done to help her feel more supported in her original Algebra 1 class, one student expressed the following:

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*I wish she would've, like, asked us about our day. Instead of getting straight to work and being in seats. . . . I feel like if she was able to see that a student like me was struggling a little bit . . . then she might've been able to offer some help.*

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**Students felt unempowered to approach the teacher and initiate unscripted conversations themselves.** When describing their original attempt to pass Algebra 1 or English 9, students perceived that their teachers were disinterested in them because of their academic performance and noted that their classmates who were “smarter” could talk to the teacher more easily. Students also reported not feeling close enough to their teachers to be able to initiate conversations on these topics themselves or otherwise ask teachers for help to address learning barriers in a timely manner.

### **Relational Factors That Facilitated Learning**

In contrast to their experiences when taking the course for the first time, students indicated that they had more positive interactions with their teachers during the credit recovery course.

**The quality of students’ relationship with the teacher mattered.** Students described feeling that the quality of their relationship with the credit recovery course teachers were generally more positive and productive than their relationships with their teachers when students first took the course. Students felt that the credit recovery teachers did a better job of reaching out to the class, which allowed students to approach the teachers and initiate requests for help. Moreover, students felt that their credit recovery teachers were more accommodating and open to working with them individually to address learning issues. Because of this accommodation and flexibility, students perceived these teachers to be more available for students outside the course. For example, when asked what their credit recovery teachers did differently or better than their original course teachers, students said the teachers’ patience and availability outside of course time mattered.

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*He explains it more and he’s more one-on-one . . . If you need help, he’ll have hours to talk to him after school or during lunch . . . [the ninth-grade teacher] wasn’t very helpful in explaining. She would explain it one time and if you didn’t get it, you didn’t get it. You could go to her after school, but she wouldn’t explain it good.*

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## Instructional Factors

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Despite a variety of experiences that prevented students from passing their Algebra 1 and English 9 courses in their first attempts, students reported that the credit recovery courses addressed some of the most salient barriers to their learning. This finding significantly pertained to instructional factors related to teacher practices and course structure. Students felt that credit recovery helped them overcome many of the instructional issues that prevented them from passing Algebra 1 and English 9 when they originally took the course in ninth grade.

### Instructional Factors That Inhibited Learning

**Students reported that multiple features of the original course impeded their success.** With respect to the instructional features of the original courses, students shared that the course material was not engaging, but it could have been made more engaging through opportunities for group work. Moreover, students reported that the rapid pace through which teachers moved through course content and the frequency of demanding assignments were obstacles to their learning. Students lamented that they felt as though the grading scheme often was “high stakes,” which resulted in situations in which single mistakes on assignments or tests made them feel as though not passing the course was inevitable because each mistake was so costly in terms of graded points. When asked what they wished their ninth-grade course teacher(s) had done differently, many asked for different ways to fulfill the required assignments for the course, such as submitting a poster instead of an essay or by having more quizzes to replace the few cumulative tests that weighed more heavily toward their grade.

**Students thought the course content was too advanced.** Students who did not pass the English 9 course wanted their teachers to provide course content and instruction that they felt was more appropriate for their grade level. One student specifically felt that the material in her original course was too challenging and not relevant for a ninth grader’s knowledge or ability.

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*I personally think the teacher was too hard . . . and . . . I was barely a freshman, he expected us to have vocabulary from college and expected everything to be perfect.*

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Other students also perceived that the teacher’s expectations for their performance in the original course shaped their performance by affecting their motivation to learn or seek help. Specifically, students discussed how these expectations made them feel inadequate and not worthy of approaching the teacher.

**Students perceived that teachers did not know how or why students were struggling academically.** Students wanted us to know that they felt their teachers did not understand what was preventing them from learning or passing the course. When asked how they knew this, students responded that their Algebra 1 teachers rarely, if ever, engaged them in conversation about their learning experience

in the course. Students went on to say that it was not always easy for them to talk to teachers about their learning barriers. Students often described a lack of dialogue with their teachers except for anything related to the equations or assignments being discussed.

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*When we would ever have a question about something, [the teacher] would have us ask the people around us, and if we didn't understand it, we'd have to try to think of every possible thing it could be, and then the last resort is [to] ask her. She didn't let us get up. She didn't let us ask anyone.*

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Feelings of “getting left behind” by the course were common in students’ experiences; in some cases, even though they had questions, they were discouraged from asking the teacher. In these cases, it was clear that students perceived the lack of interaction with the teacher to be the central issue that challenged their learning, which was not replaceable by interactions with other students—even if those engagements focused on learning content.

### **Instructional Factors That Facilitated Learning**

In contrast to the instructional factors that inhibited learning, students reported that flexible course time was an instructional factor that led to greater engagement with the material. Students felt that the longer instructional periods for summer school provided a better opportunity to focus on the lessons.<sup>11</sup> Students also mentioned that the pace of the credit recovery course allowed them to slow down and engage more deeply with the content. For example, when asked to explain why she felt her Algebra 1 credit recovery course worked better for her than her original course, one student explained as follows:

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*I could ask more math questions, I could communicate more, [and] I could spend more time really thinking about stuff. It was a longer class time, so it was more time for me to really understand it more. It was less kids than an actual class, so that was better too . . . [The teacher] just talked slower and didn't rush through everything. She would break down every little thing from the assignment.*

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Appreciation for the different pace of the credit recovery course was especially true in the online modality, when students progressed through the lesson sections at their own pace.

When probed with follow-up questions, students said that the credit recovery course worked for them when they had the liberty to work on their assignment for the day at their own pace, knowing that the teacher was there to help them if they needed it. They also reported that the credit recovery classroom environment was generally more lenient compared with the original course, and many students used their personal earphones to listen to music while working on assignments. Students felt empowered to be vulnerable in their learning, to not be apprehensive about making mistakes, and to ask the instructor for help. These relaxed learning conditions contrasted starkly with the pressure and

expectations of the original course, in which students thought the grading was more rigid, and students felt more distant from their teacher. Finally, students reflected on the relatability of the instruction and how that contributed to greater understanding of the material.

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*Last year I was in algebra, and that's like slope and all that. And [the teacher] would . . . put on some videos like a rollercoaster that he would connect to slope. That made more sense than just straight math.*

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**Students reported that one-on-one attention from the instructor benefited their learning.** Students felt that they had more opportunities to learn in the credit recovery course because they received more one-on-one attention from the instructor. We heard from students that this was one critical way in which the credit recovery course mattered for their learning because they often did not have meaningful opportunities to work one-on-one with their teacher when they first took the course. Specifically, we heard from 14 of 17 students that working with a teacher one-on-one helped them learn the course content. For example, when asked to share why she felt the credit recovery course worked better for her than the original course she did not pass, a student said:

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*[The teacher] worked with me one-on-one when I had questions on the problem she assigned us, or when I didn't understand them, she would help me get through the problems. . . . She would do one walk around the class, and then later in the class I would raise my hand if I needed help . . . if you needed help, she would help you. And it wasn't so much as a fast pace either. . . . But if you needed more help with it or needed extra time, she would accommodate it. . . .*

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## Nonacademic Factors

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Although past research has shown that exposure to a range of academic and socioeconomic risk factors is associated with student performance in core courses,<sup>12</sup> our interviews gave us an opportunity to hear directly from students how these unequal circumstances affected their academic performance. Importantly, these conversations highlighted how these social and nonacademic factors played a role in shifting students' academic mindsets during the transition to credit recovery courses.

### Nonacademic Factors That Inhibited Learning

Social conditions inherited by students impacted their academic journeys. Nonacademic factors influenced the extent to which students could focus on learning while taking the course the first time around. Often, these factors were family and social conditions that, although external to the school campus, still affected student experiences inside the school. For example, some students reported that because of their family's economic situation, they had to move unexpectedly during ninth grade or

joined their ninth-grade class late in the semester. Students described feeling at a disadvantage compared with their classmates because they joined their school later in the school year or had missed significant portions of instruction that were needed to pass the course.

Students also shared poignant examples of how unstable housing and other social risk factors played a role in not passing their original course. Notably, one student shared how the loss of a primary caretaker in her life affected her ability to participate in her original English 9 course.

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*I had just lost my grandpa. He raised me. I lived with him for a while, so that was pretty much me going through my grief, and I was at a very bad anger stage. . . . I was living with him, so I would come home and he wasn't there, and I wouldn't leave the stuff that was going on at home, at home. And I would take it to school and act out over there. So, I definitely felt like now I've been able to learn how to leave stuff at home or leave stuff at school.*

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## Nonacademic Factors That Facilitated Learning

**Concerns about their social status at school motivated students to succeed in credit recovery.** When talking to students about how they came to perform better in credit recovery compared with the original course they did not pass, we often heard that students grew more aware of the need to make more of an effort to pass the credit recovery course. The ways that students described this motivation suggested that repeating the course as a more senior student would be embarrassing because it would jeopardize their social reputation among peers at school. Specifically, students often described a newfound motivation to pass the course during credit recovery to avoid shame or embarrassment that they anticipated would result from having to repeat the course again during the regular school year with more junior classmates. For example, when asked why they began completing their homework during credit recovery, when they had not done so during ninth grade, some students reported feeling an urgency to pass the course in summer school that was absent previously. Other students also shared this sentiment and reflected on the shift in their “mindset” in helping them see the work they had to complete to pass credit recovery.

## Conclusion

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A variety of factors play into students’ learning experiences in their initial course enrollment and credit recovery course. Generally, however, students who could recover course credit agreed about what factors helped them learn. For students who struggle to pass core courses in high school, success in a credit recovery course can hinge on the interplay between instructional, relational, and nonacademic factors. These findings provide new evidence for existing claims about learning as an interactive process between teachers and students. In particular, our conversations with students suggested that one key to unlocking student success is a student–teacher relationship that promotes interaction and



one-on-one support. In addition, our findings suggested that students may be more motivated to engage in the course if teachers can connect with students on a personal level and convey an interest in understanding what content students are struggling with and demonstrate a more overt willingness to work with the student.

Furthermore, feedback from students suggests that credit recovery courses should be structured in ways that facilitate student engagement and learning. For example, the longer class periods students had for summer credit recovery seemed to allow students more time to focus and engage in the course content, as well as more time for one-on-one student–teacher interactions. Similarly, teachers had time, or the online course program had the functionality, to better align the instructional pacing to student needs.

The findings presented in this brief should be interpreted within the context and limitations of the analysis. In particular, we spoke with a small subset of students who experienced a credit recovery course, and our sample was limited to students who successfully recovered credit during the summer. Future research should seek to document a more diverse range of student experiences, including students who did not pass their credit recovery class and students who retake courses during the school year.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power: "Student voice" in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359–390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2006.00363.x>

<sup>3</sup> Gonzalez, T. E., Hernandez-Saca, D. I., & Artiles, A. J. (2017). In search of voice: Theory and methods in K-12 student voice research in the US, 1990–2010. *Educational Review*, 69(4), 451–473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2016.1231661>

<sup>4</sup> The online learning model implemented for this study included an online curriculum provided by a vendor and credentialed in-class teachers provided by the participating schools. The in-class teacher's role was to monitor students as they worked through the online course and to provide supplemental instructional support targeted to students' needs. Although the online curriculum was the core content in these classes, teachers had flexibility to adapt and supplement instruction as they saw fit. All classes met for 2.5 hours each day in a standard classroom during the district's 5-week summer session.

<sup>5</sup> We originally intended to have a mix of students who either passed or did not pass their credit recovery course, but only students who passed the course volunteered to participate in an interview. To recruit students, we sent fliers and study informational materials to 71 unique summer credit recovery instructors and offered students \$50 for each of two interviews that they completed. We received 26 consent forms from students interested in the study, 17 of whom followed through to schedule an initial interview. Fourteen of these 17 students persisted in the study for a follow-up interview.

<sup>6</sup> Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

<sup>7</sup> Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as developmental contexts during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 225–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00725.x>

<sup>8</sup> Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher–student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(4), 493–529. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793>

<sup>9</sup> Schmakel, P. O. (2008). Early adolescents' perspectives on motivation and achievement in academics. *Urban Education*, 43(6), 723–749. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085907311831>

<sup>10</sup> Wentzel, K. R. (1998). Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(2), 202–209. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.90.2.202>

<sup>11</sup> In the Los Angeles Unified School District, summer school is structured such that each day consists of two, 2.5-hour periods that are offered daily for 20 days.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Kabbani, N. S. (2001). The dropout process in life course perspective: Early risk factors at home and school. *Teachers College Record*, 103(5), 760–822. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0161-4681.00134>



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