

# Successful Strategies for Providing Online Credit Recovery in Montana

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## Successful Strategies for Providing Online Credit Recovery in Montana

This report examines common strategies used by six Montana schools that had high student passing rates in online credit recovery courses offered by the Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) in the 2013/14 school year. The study is based on analysis of interviews conducted with school-based facilitators who oversee the implementation of the online MTDA credit recovery program at their schools. The facilitators were asked to describe how their schools had implemented the MTDA program and to reflect on specific strategies that may have contributed to high student passing rates.

The report includes an overview of the increasing prevalence of online credit recovery programs, particularly in rural schools and districts, a description of the MTDA program, an overview of the key findings drawn from the interviews, and a discussion of common challenges associated with online credit recovery. It concludes with a summary of the study's limitations and suggestions for further research.

### The role of online credit recovery programs

Credit accrual plays an integral role in on-time graduation, specifically in subjects required for earning a diploma. While Montana districts are allowed to set their own requirements for graduation, Montana Rule 10.55.905 outlines 13 specific credits that students must earn to qualify for a state-accredited diploma, including four units of English language arts and two units of mathematics (Mont. Admin., 2013). Students who fail critical courses such as these must make up the credit and therefore are at risk of falling off track for graduation. In Montana, there are typically three options for recovering credit: taking face-to-face courses offered during non-school hours, repeating the course during the regular school year, or completing an online credit recovery course during school hours (Stevens & Frazelle, 2016).

For rural students and students attending small schools, online options for credit recovery may play a particularly important role. Schools can leverage online programs to offer credit recovery in a wider range of subjects, with more flexible scheduling, and with fewer staff members than would be needed for traditional face-to-face credit recovery options during non-school hours (Oliver, Osborne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009). In an online format, one teacher can oversee several students, each of whom is making up credits in a different subject area. This is both more cost effective and more feasible than dedicating time, space, and staff hours for each individual course.

A recent study of online credit recovery in Montana predicted a steep increase in student participation rates in the near future, partly based on recent trends seen in other rural states (Miller, 2012). Despite this growing popularity, research on what constitutes an effective credit recovery program remains limited, particularly in regard to specific strategies that could be linked to higher student passing rates (Stevens & Frazelle, 2016).

## The Montana Digital Academy

MTDA has been the primary provider of online courses in Montana since 2011. A tuition-free resource funded by the Montana State Legislature, MTDA provides an online platform and course curricula, but each school is allowed to determine its own structure for delivering the courses (Montana Digital Academy, n.d.). For this reason, implementation strategies vary greatly between schools.

The MTDA Connect Credit Recovery Program comprises 50 courses for credit recovery in subject areas such as English language arts, math, science, social studies, and several electives. The program blends MTDA staff support—provided by certified teachers who serve as academic area coaches—and school personnel who coordinate the program on site. These coordinators—typically called school-based facilitators—are charged with helping students sign up for classes, overseeing the program, and communicating with MTDA. Although not mandatory, MTDA requests that the school-based facilitators provide the following support:

- Helping students complete entrance counseling forms
- Reviewing student transcripts and proper course placement
- Ensuring reliable access to computers
- Ensuring adult monitoring and oversight at the beginning of each course and at least weekly throughout the course
- Proctoring of unit and semester finals
- Providing access to email or fax for submission of written work
- Communicating with MTDA staff regarding technical problems or programmatic issues

Most MTDA credit recovery classes involve 3–6 modules of curriculum and include pre-tests that give students the opportunity to test out of individual units. Currently, MTDA allows for open enrollment throughout the school year, although enrollment is limited to one course at a time per student.<sup>1</sup> The curriculum for each course is reviewed by the MTDA curriculum director and the MTDA content teacher and—for English language arts and mathematics—is aligned with the Montana Common Core State Standards (Montana Digital Academy, n.d.).

Districts using the MTDA have experienced varying degrees of success. While the overall passing rate for students taking MTDA credit recovery courses was 57 percent in the 2013/14 school year, individual school-level rates ranged from 0–100 percent, with the median rate near 60 percent.<sup>2</sup> School and district leaders in Montana are looking for evidence on how to best support their students who are using the MTDA credit recovery option, especially since the program is tuition free.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Students can start and complete courses at different times, but all students must finish their courses by a specified cutoff date for each session. These session dates are set by MTDA and approximately coincide with the semester schedules used by most Montana districts. Schools can request permission to allow a student to take more than one course in a session, but they need to prove that the student has sufficient time in their schedule to complete each course.

2 The overall passing rate and median are based on the author's analysis of MTDA data from 2013/14. The passing rate is calculated by dividing the number of students who passed a course by the number of students who enrolled in a course. In addition to students who did not complete a course, the 43 percent includes students that moved out of state, moved to another Montana district that does not utilize MTDA's credit recovery program, or dropped out of school.

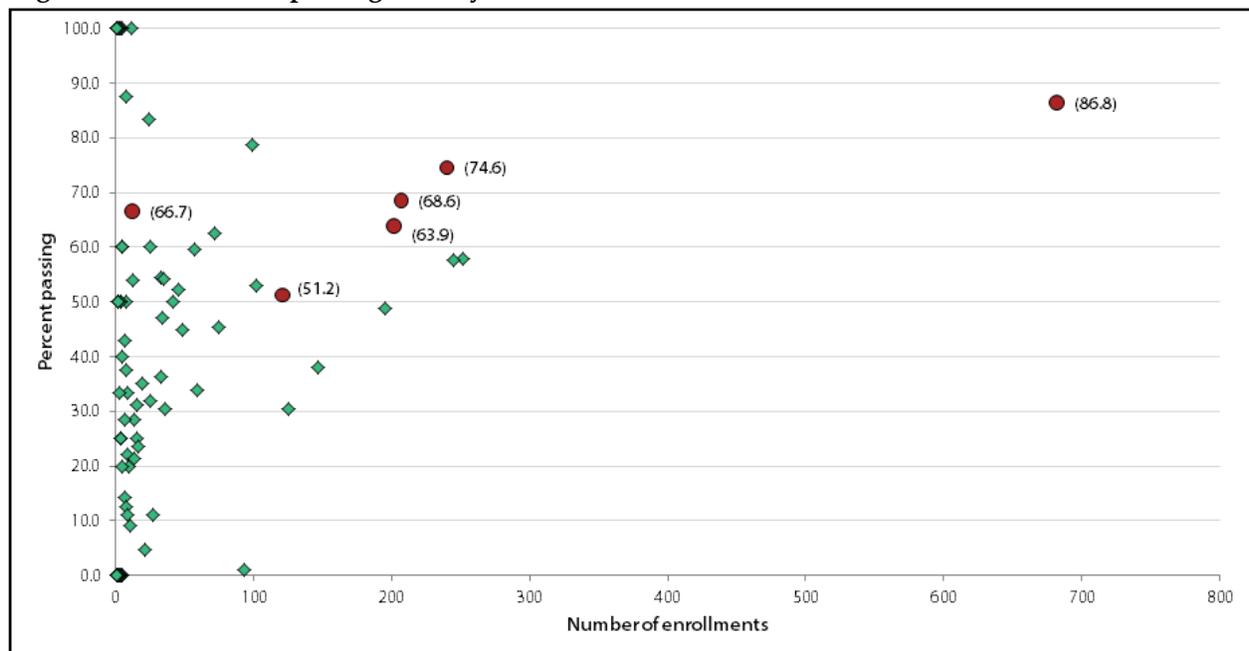
3 This information is based on interviews conducted for *Online credit recovery: Course enrollment and completion patterns in Montana Digital Academy schools* (Stevens & Frazelle, 2016) and correspondence with members of the Montana Data Use Alliance.

## Identifying schools with high passing rates

Ninety-six schools participated in the MTDA credit recovery program during the 2013/14 school year (figure 1), representing vastly different student enrollment and passing rates. Eight schools with passing rates above the median (60 percent) and with at least 10 MTDA credit recovery course enrollments over the school year were invited to participate in an interview to discuss aspects of their MTDA credit recovery programs that might be associated with higher passing rates, such as the basic structure of the program and the supports they provide to students. Five of the eight schools who met these criteria chose to participate in interviews (denoted as red circles in figure 1).

These schools represent a variety of student populations and are located in various regions of the state.<sup>4</sup> The study also includes one school with a high number of MTDA enrollees but a passing rate slightly lower than the median. This school was identified by the MTDA as having a strong, long-running program and was included in order to incorporate greater diversity in the study population, both in student demographics and geographic location. Information gathered from this school added to the robustness of program delivery approaches by offering the perspective of a school that had tried several approaches over time. The inclusion of this school resulted in a total of six school interviews.

**Figure 1. School-level passing rates by number of enrolled students**



Source: Author's analysis of 2013/14 MTDA data. Red circles indicate the schools who participated in an interview. Passing rates for the interviewed schools are provided in parentheses.

<sup>4</sup> School enrollments numbers and geographic information are provided in the appendix.

## Common strategies used by Montana schools with high passing rates

Four common strategies revealed by the interviews



**Establish consistent program structure**



**Provide instructional support**



**Build relationships and establish open communication across the program**



**Develop data tools to monitor and communicate student progress**

### Strategy 1: Establish consistent program structure

The majority of the schools included in this study have participated in the MTDA credit recovery program for several years, which has given them time to establish a consistent structure for program delivery. These structures typically include some combination of the following four elements:



Create a specific time and place for students to take online credit recovery courses within the regular school year and within normal school hours.

Fund a certified teacher to run the program and providing an adequate number of class periods to meet student need.

Foster schoolwide support for the MTDA program.

Secure external funding sources, if necessary.

**Create a specific time and place for students to take online credit recovery courses within the regular school year and within normal school hours.** The facilitators generally reported higher student passing rates for online credit recovery courses taken during the regular school year as compared to the same type of courses taken during the summer. One reason for this could be that all interviewed schools have a specific space and time for students to take credit recovery classes within the school day and in a room equipped with computers. Schools consistently discussed the importance of providing enough time and support for students to master their work during the school day so that it diminished the need to take work home. According to the facilitators, credit recovery courses offered after school or at the school site during the summer typically require students to provide their own transportation, which can be especially challenging for students from rural and remote areas.



**Fund a certified teacher to run the program and providing an adequate number of class periods to meet student need.** All interviewed schools fund a certified teacher to serve as the program facilitator. According to the facilitators, this not only ensures that students get adequate academic support, it also promotes staff buy-in for the validity of the program and encourages the regular classroom staff to view online credit recovery as another form of intervention for struggling students. The facilitators also mentioned the need to provide an adequate number of class periods so that students have flexibility to fit the online courses into their regular schedule. For some schools, only one period is required to meet the schoolwide need for credit recovery, while in others, nearly a full day of 5 to 6 class periods is required.

**Foster schoolwide support for the MTDA program.** For 5 of the 6 schools, MTDA is the only credit recovery option offered. Given that many other options are available (albeit for a fee) this suggests that these schools have fostered schoolwide support for the MTDA program. According to the interviewees from these five schools, this support is based on two factors. First, the MTDA is viewed as a “homegrown” program with staff members that are located within the state and are accessible and responsive to school and district personnel. Second, MTDA, district administrators, and school-based facilitators have all made a concerted effort to create buy-in from the regular classroom teachers at these schools by providing evidence of the academic rigor of the coursework and information about how the courses were developed.

**Secure external funding sources, if necessary.** Two schools have secured external funding from organizations such as the United Way or through grant opportunities such as Graduation Matters Montana, a state-funded program that supports communities as they implement local initiatives addressing high school graduation and postsecondary readiness. These funds are typically used to pay for a certified teacher to serve as the facilitator for the online credit recovery program or for tutors.

## Strategy 2: Provide instructional support



Create an active learning environment through goalsetting, tutoring, and follow up.

Identify academic support within the building.

Encourage students to talk to the MTDA online instructors.

Promote staff responsibility for student outcomes and remove barriers to student success.

**Create an active learning environment through goalsetting, tutoring, and follow up.** Each of the interviewed schools has a program facilitator whose responsibilities include setting up the program, creating a spreadsheet to track student progress, and reporting to the district. But beyond assisting with these technical issues, facilitators in these schools conduct regular check-ins with students on setting and achieving goals, such as setting a schedule for assignments in order to complete a course by the end of the semester. Schools have found the most success when the facilitator creates an active learning environment through this type of goalsetting and tutoring rather than simply supervising the classroom as if it were a study hall. For example, one facilitator regularly tells his students, “You are going to get sick of me if you keep falling behind,” and explained that it is essential for an adult to follow up with students when they miss their weekly goals. Over the years, at least 10 students have come back and thanked him, he said, claiming they would not have finished without his persistent guidance.

**Identify academic support within the building.** In addition to helping students set goals and stay on track, all sites identify academic support within the building for students struggling with the course material. In these sites, the facilitator is a certified teacher, primarily in mathematics or English language arts. On the rare occasion when the facilitator cannot help the student with coursework, the schools look for an alternate means of support. A few facilitators mentioned that they can call upon other teachers in the building to provide subject-specific support. One site also employs practicum teacher education students from a local college to provide additional tutoring support during the credit recovery class periods.

**Encourage students to talk to the MTDA online instructors.** Facilitators also encourage students to talk directly with the MTDA online instructors. According to the facilitators, students have consistently found the online instructors to be “very responsive” to their questions and needs.

**Promote staff responsibility for student outcomes and remove barriers to student success.** Every interviewed facilitator expressed the need for school staff members to take responsibility for student outcomes and to view online credit recovery courses as another way of removing barriers for students who are struggling. As one facilitator put it, “[We] try to take away every excuse the kids come up with. Take away the obstacles and keep working on it.” According to one facilitator, online programs work best when they have the full support of the entire teaching staff, are viewed as another form of intervention for students who are struggling, and are part of an overall, schoolwide “do whatever it takes” mindset. For example, when asked why students weren’t simply allowed to take the regular course over again, one facilitator replied that it was a matter of offering students more options: “There’s a reason the student failed—it didn’t work with the teacher, the classroom setting, and so on, so we need to try something else.” Variations on this statement were present even at schools that do allow students to take the regular course again.

### Strategy 3: Build relationships and establish open communication across the program



Provide consistent encouragement and mentoring to students.

Maintain ongoing communication with the MTDA staff.

**Provide consistent encouragement and mentoring to students.** Every facilitator talked in depth about the importance of establishing caring relationships with students. Without exception, they viewed providing encouragement and mentoring as central to their relatively high completion rates. As one leader said, “These kids are somewhat disenfranchised,” implying that the students need caring and interested adults in their lives. Another leader emphasized the importance of having multiple adults develop relationships with each student: “Let them know that you care, and that there are three others right there behind you that also care.” Creating a nurturing environment for these types of relationships was reported to increase student buy-in and cooperation during class time. Establishing strong rapport with students allowed facilitators to communicate honestly and openly about setting and achieving goals and was pivotal in holding students accountable when goals were not met.

**Maintain ongoing communication with the MTDA staff.** In addition to strong communication with students, the schools participate in ongoing communication with the MTDA staff. Facilitators talked about their direct communication with the MTDA curriculum director to brainstorm potential solutions when they have multiple students struggling in a certain course. The facilitators pointed to this direct communication as a key difference from other online credit recovery options their schools have used. Most of the schools have worked with MTDA leaders for many years and have seen MTDA respond to concerns expressed by school personnel, students, and family members. One example is the change to an open enrollment system. MTDA previously limited enrollment to a few weeks at the beginning of each semester. Based on communication with schools, they switched to an open enrollment policy to better accommodate the different start dates used by districts and to meet the needs of students who move from one district to another in mid-semester.

## Strategy 4: Develop data tools to monitor and communicate student progress



Develop an additional tracking and monitoring tool to supplement the MTDA data dashboard.

**Develop an additional tracking and monitoring tool to supplement the MTDA data dashboard.** All facilitators have developed a tracking and monitoring tool beyond the data dashboard provided by MTDA. These tools have been developed exclusively as Excel spreadsheets and are used to assess and communicate students' progress toward achieving goals and completing assignments. This keeps students on track for completing the course within the given timeframe. While MTDA allows students to enroll freely throughout the semester, it does have strict end dates, which are typically set a couple weeks after most districts close their semester. The mismatch of calendar days requires districts to set their own internal course completion dates so that students can start fresh with the rest of their classmates and move on to the next semester or the summer term.

Common items in the school-developed tracking and monitoring tools include:

- Student name
- Grade
- Adult contact
- Course name
- Date of last activity
- Minutes spent online in the last 2, 3, and 4 weeks
- Percentage of online courses completed
- Notes regarding interventions that have been provided to the student

According to the facilitators, building an Excel spreadsheet that incorporates student transcripts is time consuming but is an invaluable tool for communicating with students, families, and teachers and for tracking students' progress throughout their academic careers. Facilitators also mentioned that the spreadsheets were essential for student accountability. As one facilitator emphasized:

*[The] big thing is holding students accountable. You need to check in with the kids a minimum of four times a semester to reset goals. [The] nice thing is that the kids can catch up quickly. In regular school, [if] you miss three weeks and get behind, you can't catch up.*

## Common challenges for online credit recovery programs

This study did not include interviews with MTDA facilitators in districts with lower passing rates. However, *Online credit recovery: Course enrollment and passing rate patterns in Montana Digital Academy schools* (Stevens & Frazelle, 2016) is based on similar interviews conducted with a broad range of Montana districts using MTDA for credit recovery. Those interviews provided some insight into the challenges faced by districts that had lower passing rates during this same school year. These included difficulties in overcoming teacher skepticism about the academic validity of the online courses and problems with low student attendance rates during the online instructional period (Stevens & Frazelle, 2016).

Although the schools interviewed for the current study have some of the highest MTDA course passing rates in the state, they identified many of the same challenges. For example, some facilitators mentioned that initial buy-in from teachers was difficult because they worried that the courses would not be rigorous enough or that students would purposefully fail regular classes to become eligible for the online options because they were deemed “easier”. However, all six facilitators interviewed for this study said they were able to quell these fears over time.

Strategies for promoting staff buy-in for the online credit recovery program included:

- Providing a detailed description of the process MTDA used to align the online coursework to the Common Core State Standards
- Ensuring the school-based facilitator is a certified teacher
- Providing professional development opportunities for teachers, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, which helps establish the connection between student behavior and academic performance

Almost all facilitators reported that they have had honest conversations with teachers in their building about students whose personal lives are chaotic, which has caused the students to feel disconnected from school and occasionally leads to a “comfort zone with failing.” According to the facilitators, these conversations have increased empathy amongst staff members and have fostered buy-in for the program. The way these facilitators have implemented the MTDA program also allows students time to talk about the issues they are facing outside the school building and has created space for caring adults to build relationships with the students. As one facilitator put it, “Give a little bit and the kids really respond.”

## Limitations of the study

This report addresses a specific need expressed by education leaders in Montana. However, the information here is potentially informative for others looking to increase student success in online credit recovery courses. This study was not designed to be comprehensive, and its results should be interpreted with caution, given the limited sample size of six districts and the fact that the key strategies are based on subjective opinion rather than objective data. Although low-performing schools were not specifically interviewed for this report, a similar report, *Online credit recovery: Course enrollment and passing rate patterns in Montana Digital Academy schools* (Stevens & Frazelle, 2016), did include interviews with a broad range of districts using the MTDA. Those interviews included questions that were very similar to the ones used in this study. Previously interviewed districts had a large variation in passing rates, and the strategies described in this report were not brought up by the programs with lower passing rates. Given the design of this study, however, it cannot be said that the presented strategies in this report necessarily cause higher completion rates. Instead, we hope that those implementing online credit recovery programs will use these common implementation strategies as a discussion piece when considering the development of their own program.

## Suggestions for further research

Previous research has shown that failing just two semester courses during freshman year can cut a student's chance of graduating in four years by almost 50 percent (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Online credit recovery has the potential to provide a cost-effective and convenient option for keeping students on track to graduate by allowing them to make up credits without falling farther behind. This potential is especially important for rural and remote schools that may lack the resources to provide other forms of credit recovery. However, implementation of online credit recovery still varies greatly—in Montana and elsewhere—and research has yet to identify what constitutes effective practice or how policy can best support and enable this practice. Future studies could also examine whether holistic supports—such as those provided by the schools interviewed for this study—are more cost effective than more typical forms of credit recovery deployed elsewhere.

## Appendix A: Study methodology

### Description of qualitative data

We invited schools with passing rates above 60 percent and with at least 10 MTDA credit recovery enrollments to participate in an interview to discuss their use of the program and their implementation strategies. Five schools chose to participate. These schools represented a variety of student populations (table A1). One district with a high number of MTDA enrollees but a slightly lower completion rate in 2013/14 was included to further incorporate diversity into the types of schools interviewed, both in student enrollment size and geographic location (that is, urban or rural). Beyond adding diversity to the sample, the inclusion of this school's perspective adds to the narrative by offering a long-range perspective. MTDA identified this school as having a strong, long-running program. The inclusion of this school resulted in a total of six interviews.

Table A1. School enrollment and geographic type

School	Enrollment	Type
A	1,963	Urban
B	425	Rural
C	1,512	Urban
D	1,294	Urban
E	175	Alternative
F	168	Rural

Source: Information from the Montana Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students (GEMS) public student information system on December 21, 2015. Website: <http://gems.opi.mt.gov/SitePages/School-Info.aspx>

Program facilitators at each of the six schools were asked the following questions:

- How long has your school been implementing the MTDA credit recovery program?
- How are students identified for the program? Can anyone participate?
- What type of support is provided to the faculty facilitator? Does the facilitator tutor the students in addition to proctoring exams?
- Have there been any challenges to implementing the program? Any tips that you would share with other districts?
- Are there any other factors that you would associate with your relatively high student completion rates?

REL Northwest staff members transcribed the interviews and one reviewer used frequency tables to code each response for predominant themes. A second reviewer used these tables to further categorize themes across questions. Finally, an internal review team of five REL Northwest staff members confirmed the four identified categories of support.



## Description of quantitative data

This study is based on MTDA enrollment data for the 2013/14 academic year for students who enrolled in online credit recovery courses. Only the most recent full year of data was used for two reasons: to describe enrollment in online credit recovery programs as they are currently delivered and to avoid pooling data across multiple years.

The MTDA provided the following student-level data for the fall, spring, and summer terms of the 2013/14 academic year:

- Student identifier
- School and district identifier (for enrollment data from the MTDA)
- Student grade level
- Academic subject area (for example, English 9)
- Student's grade in the course

## Data collection

The MTDA completed a data-sharing agreement with REL Northwest and shared student data in a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)–compliant and secure manner. To protect the privacy of the schools and representatives who participated in interviews, individual names and school names are not included in the report. To protect student privacy, MTDA agreed to uphold FERPA compliance as a precondition for participating in the enrollment analysis.

## Appendix B: One-pager reference sheet

Use the following sheet as a quick reference guide for the information in this report.

## RELATIONSHIPS. SUPPORT. STRUCTURE. DATA.

# Successful Strategies for Online Credit Recovery



### Lessons from Montana

The Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) provides online education opportunities to Montana students through courses taught by licensed Montana teachers. The MTDA Connect Credit Recovery Program includes 50 credit recovery courses in subject areas such as English language arts, math, science, social studies, and several electives. MTDA provides an online platform and course curricula, but each school is allowed to determine its own structure for delivering the courses.



### Build relationships and establish open communication across the program

Provide consistent encouragement and mentoring to students

Maintain ongoing communication with online credit recovery staff



### Develop data tools to monitor and communicate student progress

Develop an additional tracking and monitoring tool to supplement the online credit recovery data dashboard



### Provide instructional support

Create an active learning environment through goalsetting, tutoring, and follow up

Identify academic support within the building  
Encourage students to talk to the online instructors  
Promote staff responsibility for student outcomes and remove barriers to student success



### Establish consistent program structure

Create a specific time and place for students to take online credit recovery courses within the regular school year and within normal school hours

Fund a certified teacher to run the program and provide an adequate number of class periods to meet student need  
Foster schoolwide support for the program  
If necessary, secure external funding sources

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