

Schools are boosting graduation rates by offering 'credit recovery.' But what are students learning?



Garfield High School math teacher Liliana Villalpando teaches a PASS credit-recovery course in December. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

By [Sonali Kohli](#) *Contact Reporter*

It used to be almost impossible for students such as Nicky Maldonado to graduate from high school on time.

The James A. Garfield Senior High School student failed close to half of his 9th-grade classes, and it took a persistent football coach and sports eligibility requirements in his sophomore year to make him begin to take academics seriously.

Students scrambling to catch up used to have to go to continuation school, summer school or repeat classes during the year. But Nicky also had other options.

Since 2015, his sophomore year, the Los Angeles Unified School District has poured \$30 million into intervention programs such as online and compressed “credit-recovery” courses to give students more, and often much speedier, ways to pull their grades up from failure.

But it’s hard to know whether students in these classes are getting the same level of education as they would in a regular class, or even as their peers in other credit-recovery courses. The district lacks such records as how many students tried and failed to complete

such courses, and how long it took them to finish a class. Measuring the rigor of credit-recovery methods is difficult, too, because of a lack of consistency in how the programs are run from school to school.

Schools around the country started to amp up credit-recovery efforts 15 years ago, when the federal government began pressuring districts to improve graduation rates. Its heavy use [has been criticized](#), including in [New York City](#), which has the only school district larger than L.A.'s.

Still, graduation rates are popular indicators of district success, and the pressure to increase them is great.

L.A. Unified made its graduation requirements more rigorous for the class of 2016 — requiring students to take and at least minimally pass the array of college-preparatory courses necessary to qualify for entrance in a state public university. Theoretically, they should leave prepared for higher education.

But at the same time, Supt. Michelle King is going all out on graduation, which may work at cross purposes. She's pushing for a rate of 100%, a feat never before achieved by a major urban school district.

Already, to reach an all-time-high 77% graduation rate last year, the district made heavy use of credit recovery.

And the district plans to keep up its \$15-million-per-year push to get failing students across the graduation stage on time, using methods that critics say create a system of lower academic standards for some students.

Nicky failed the second semester of ninth-grade biology. Lucky for him, by his junior year, the district was offering a program called PASS (Performance Assessment Student Support). PASS is described as modular — focused on course content that students who failed a class haven't mastered. The idea is that they can progress through modules at their own pace, skipping ones whose contents they can show they already know.

Over winter break, Nicky was one of more than 150 students to show up at Garfield for various PASS classes.

In Garfield's version of PASS, Nicky was offered the chance to raise his biology grade from an F to as high as a C in just one week.

But that's not necessarily the case in PASS programs at other schools. The district hasn't instituted across-the-board standards for what credit-recovery options schools offer or how they should teach or grade them.

Some schools set no limits on how high a student can raise a grade through credit recovery. Others set strict limits. In one of the PASS English courses that the Los Angeles Times visited, most students finished in one week and they did not have to read an entire book. Another required students to read a book and was expected to run longer than a week.

District officials say mastery of material matters more than time in the classroom. They also said PASS courses often take longer than a week, but could not provide any district-wide data tracking how long students spent in their PASS courses.

The incompleteness of the record leaves much unknown.

What the district can say is that in 2015-16, the first year of its big credit-recovery push, 33,071 high school students — nearly one in six — completed at least one credit-recovery course to try and make up for a failed class. On average, students took about two credit-recovery classes each. In 2016-17, as of Dec. 31, 16,211 high school students had completed at least one credit-recovery course for a class they had previously failed.

The data show that students passed about 71% of these credit-recovery courses. But that number may not be so clear-cut. For instance, some schools enter information only when a student completes a credit-recovery course and do not note when a student gives up in the middle.

If most students are passing the credit-recovery courses, that could be a red flag that they are too easy or that teachers are under too much pressure to meet district goals. It could also mean that the teachers handling credit-recovery courses are especially effective, and that the school district should pay attention to what they're doing. Conversely, if many students are not successfully finishing, the classes could perhaps have problems or be too hard. Right now, there's no way to know beyond the anecdotal information that district officials say they get from schools.

It usually takes a few years for schools to collect data accurately after a district rolls out a program of this size, said Sarah Frazelle, who has looked at credit-recovery programs in Montana for the research and consulting group Education Northwest.

But “at least keeping track of how many kids are you putting into the program and how many are passing ... shouldn’t be a big ask,” Frazelle said. “What they’re losing is the ability to see where they can actually tweak the program.”

The district has applied for a federal grant to compare credit-recovery programs, officials said, and the data collection is improving. But schools are still being trained.

During each school year, the district estimates how many seniors are on track to graduate on time. In December 2015, by [its own calculations](#), only about half of seniors were on track to complete most of their academic requirements. But by the end of that year in which credit-recovery took hold and King launched her \$15-million “all-hands-on-deck” graduation effort, the district had pulled off its highest-ever graduation rate.

This year’s early predictions were similarly dismal. As of March, only 52% of seniors were on track to graduate. But as of June 20, the district upped that estimate to 82% of current seniors.

But what will that high rate mean?

Even before the district embraced new methods of credit recovery, students’ futures were not looking rosy. Of about 26,700 graduates in 2008, only 17% graduated from a four-year college within six years, according to [a district report](#).

“Everyone is celebrating these graduation rates that may not be a reflection of what our children actually learned,” said Ryan Smith, executive director of the nonprofit advocacy group Education-Trust West. “If credit recovery is not equivalent to a class you should take ... you’re creating a swamp of low expectations.”

On the second day of his PASS biology class, after his teacher handed back quizzes, Nicky sat on a stool at a raised table built for science labs. But his assignments didn’t include full labs. One of his tasks that day was to fill in the elements of a food web pyramid, which Nicky completed by googling “aquatic food web” and copying the results onto his worksheet.

L.A. Unified officials acknowledge that credit recovery has played a role in its fast improving graduation rate. But they also point to other moves they've made to get more students through high school.

They've added academic counselors, and almost every student from middle school on now gets an "individualized graduation plan" stating the courses they need to graduate on time.

A new online tool helps counselors identify students falling behind and find ways to fit extra required courses or make-up classes into a student's schedule, said L.A. Unified's chief academic officer, Frances Gipson.

As for credit recovery, district officials say there is a learning curve in tracking and evaluating the programs, and that record-keeping has improved since the program began.

It's difficult because many classes are offered outside of the regular school day and schools are given so much leeway, said Cynthia Lim, the district's outgoing head of data and accountability.

The PASS program Nicky used, for example, was developed for math and English. But Garfield had staff members write their own curricula and tests to add PASS courses for science and history.

"There's always that struggle between local innovation and then wanting to standardize," Lim said. "We like to standardize so that we can pull the data and look at it, but ... you want to have local innovation, too."

District officials agreed that they need to do better at keeping and analyzing credit-recovery records. But they said it was important to get credit recovery up and running so that more students would not fall behind.

These programs may be the reason Nicky graduates on time. He wants to become an electrician, so he plans to go to trade school. But first he'll have to get that high school diploma.

He found PASS easier than a five-week algebra class he'd taken in summer school and failed. He said the short course kept him focused because "you're forced to do the work" right away.

During the spring, he took three months of Saturday school to make up a history class, and this summer, he's taking two English classes. After football practice, he plans to take an online class and try to pass Algebra I again — his third attempt.

A guide to credit-recovery options in L.A. Unified

As Los Angeles Unified School District amps up efforts to graduate high school students on time, students have more options now than ever before to make up failed classes. Figuring out which program to enroll in, though, can be confusing.

program	Online	Before or after school	During school	Weekends	During break	Anytime
programApex or Edgenuity	OnlineX	Before or after school	During school	Weekends	During break	AnytimeX
programRIG (Recovery + Intervention = Graduation)	OnlineX	Before or after schoolX	During schoolX	Weekends	During break	Anytime
programCommunity college	OnlineX	Before or after schoolX	During schoolX	WeekendsX	During break	Anytime
program5th year of high school	Online	Before or after school	During schoolX	Weekends	During break	Anytime
programAdult education	Online	Before or after schoolX	During school	Weekends	During breakX	Anytime
programRepeat courses	Online	Before or after school	During schoolX	Weekends	During break	Anytime
programSTAR 17	Online	Before or after schoolX	During school	WeekendsX	During breakX	Anytime
programPASS (Performance Assessment Student Support)	Online	Before or after schoolX	During school	WeekendsX	During breakX	Anytime
programHigh School Summer term	OnlineX	Before or after school	During school	Weekends	During breakX	Anytime
programLocal Design	Online	Before or after school	During school	Weekends	During break	AnytimeX
programIndependent Study	OnlineX	Before or after school	During school	Weekends	During break	AnytimeX

Graphics reporting by Sonali Kohli
Source: Los Angeles Unified School District

About the Terms

Apex or Edgenuity: Students can take a course online through these vendors. There are also "blended" versions with L.A. Unified teachers.

RIG (Recovery + Intervention = Graduation): Students remain enrolled in their high school, but can take a credit-recovery class through a continuation school.

Community college: Students earn high school credit for passing a community college course that is comparable to the high school course they failed, with the principal's permission.

5th year of high school: Students stay an extra year to retake courses they failed.

Adult education: Students take evening classes through adult schools.

Repeat courses: Students retake the class in its entirety after failing, during the school day.

STAR 17 (Students Taking Action for Readiness): L.A. Unified calls this a "course extension," not credit recovery. If a student receives a D in a class, they can enter into a contract with a teacher to show proficiency in the parts of the class where they suffered most and raise their grade. They must complete the requirements by the end of the next semester, and the grade will be changed. Schools can also modify this program to use it for students who failed a class.

PASS (Performance Assessment Student Support): Students complete a class they failed based on "mastery" of the material. It often happens over winter or spring break and can take as little as 30 hours (half the time you spend in a regular class). At some schools, students who use this option can only earn a C.

High school summer term: Courses taken at high schools over the summer to make up credits.

Local design: Schools can modify credit-recovery programs or create their own, as long as their local district superintendent approves it.

Independent study: Students enter into a contract with a teacher to complete assignments, tests and projects to make up a class. They must meet with the teacher at least once a week.