

Memphis City Schools Provide Second Chance for At-Risk Youth with Course Recovery Program



Overview

- Like many other school districts across the country, Memphis City Schools (MCS) has multiple students who are at-risk and who are over-age for their grade level.
- Starting in 2004, MCS initiated the Secondary Course Recovery Program. “Memphis City Schools is now one of several districts in the state that is taking steps to assist students who are over-age for their grade level and who need extra instruction and support to gain the credits they need,” said Dr. Carol R. Johnson, superintendent. “Through this program, we believe we can enable these and other at-risk students to graduate on time and earn a regular high school diploma, improve the district’s graduate rate, reduce the cohort dropout rate, and increase the use of our schools for after-school programming.”
- District staff using a multi-departmental approach created the Secondary Course Recovery Program. All courses were aligned with state and district curriculum standards and were designed to accelerate students’ ability to attain the credits they need to progress to graduation.
- Piloted in 2003–04 with only 12th grade students, MCS had 800 students eligible for course recovery after the first semester; 286 students were accepted into the program and 170 received credit in a 9-week period.

Choosing to Offer Course Recovery

“Statistics show that students two or more years over grade level have a high propensity (over 70 percent) of dropping out of school. In addition 80 percent of prisoners are high school dropouts. The state of Tennessee, and MCS in particular, decided that we needed to seriously look at what we offer these at-risk students to help them graduate from our education system,” said Ron Pope, director of student engagement, Memphis City Schools. “Many students just couldn’t succeed through the mainstream program, and we felt it was our responsibility to offer options such as alternative learning, technology, and distance learning. So, we decided to offer the Secondary Course Recovery Program starting in 2004.”

Starting a Course Recovery Program

The Secondary Course Recovery Program is offered as an after-school program with some schools also choosing to offer flexible scheduling options and study hall lab times. Course recovery is offered at least six hours per week in Memphis City high schools. Students are only eligible to participate if they have failed or received no credit in a secondary course as long as the final failing grade is 40 or above. Priority is given to students who are recommended to participate by the school’s administration or counseling office.

INSTITUTION:

Memphis City Schools

STATISTICS:

- Largest school system in Tennessee
- 118,000 K–12 students in 185 schools

DEMOGRAPHICS:

- 87% African American
- 9% Caucasian
- 4% other nationalities

CONTACT:

Ron Pope,
director of student engagement,
Memphis City Schools

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SCHOOLS

Initially, MCS planned to offer course recovery in only 10 high schools, but in the planning stage, the multi-departmental committee felt that all 29 high schools should have the opportunity to provide the Secondary Course Recovery Program. “Once the principals looked at the courses, they felt that all students should be afforded the opportunity to participate at the outset,” said Leticia Bush, special projects coordinator, Memphis City Schools.

Including the additional high schools in the program launch did not lead to a significant cost increase because the technology infrastructure, previously provided by the department of careers and technology, was already in place. The only new investments were in the software to deliver the curriculum and teachers to staff the after-school program.

Using Technology for Course Recovery

MCS decided to use PLATO® Instructional Solutions to deliver the course recovery program. Since 2000, several Memphis City high schools had already used the curriculum and found it effective to increase academic performance during the school day and for in-school suspension programs.

To customize the PLATO Learning curriculum, the district worked with PLATO Learning staff to build and offer courses aligned to state standards and the district curriculum frameworks. PLATO Instructional Solutions provided each school with diagnostic assessments to determine an individual student’s skill level and mastery of subject matter to tailor the instruction, assignments, and tests the student must complete in order to earn credit. With PLATO Learning curriculum aligned to Tennessee standards and the district curriculum, MCS was able to offer custom courses in 19 subject areas.

Motivating Students and Establishing Expectations

Pope felt that a key factor to the success of the program would be getting students to attend the courses and take an active interest in recovering missing credits. “I wanted students in the program that were dedicated to following through to completion—students that showed energy and motivation,” said Pope. In order to instill this sense of responsibility and appreciation for getting the opportunity to take course recovery, MCS requires students to apply to become part of the program; the school administration and counseling center approves or denies that application.

Once enrolled, students are asked to sign a contract agreeing to abide by the terms and conditions of the course recovery program, including:

- regular attendance
- completion of a full year’s credits in 9 weeks
- completion of all PLATO Learning assignments at 80 percent mastery or better

MCS also asks parents to take an active role, and the school hosts a parent/student conference to communicate the expectations of students participating in the program.

Involving Teachers at Each Building

Two certified teachers trained on the PLATO Learning system by PLATO® Educational Consultants staff the course recovery program at each high school. “The high schools had no problem getting teachers to staff the lab. Many had seen how PLATO Instructional Solutions worked with other students and were excited about the prospect of using it for our at-risk learners,” said Bush.

Benefits of Course Recovery

Overall, the district felt that the course recovery program would make a difference because it is an independent, self-directed learning environment. Students are able to work at their own pace with fewer dropouts because students won’t get discouraged by classroom paces or falling behind their peers.

Each school was able to see first hand the benefits of the program, and a few highlighted their experiences:

■ *Elvin Bell, science teacher and credit recovery program facilitator, Sheffield High School:*

Sheffield High School had 35 seniors participate in the kick-off course recovery program. The school offered the program in two computer labs with 25 computer workstations each. Mr. Bell stayed in the labs until 6 p.m. or later to allow students to access the technology-based courses. The school offered science, mathematics, English, U.S. government, world history, chemistry, and algebra 1 and 2 to fulfill the needs of the 35 seniors.

Mr. Bell immediately felt that the program would be successful but had to spend some time selling his colleagues on it. “Teachers were concerned it would be an easy way out—that the students would have to do less work, and it would not be as rigorous. Once I showed them the curriculum, they changed their minds,” said Bell.

“The kids thought it would be easy when they signed up but soon realized they really had to study,” said Bell. “Most shared with me after the program that they really enjoyed it because they could tell they

were learning but could go as slow or as fast as they needed to. They also loved the fact that they could work on the computer to complete the courses. There is such interest going into the fall that we are hoping to extend it to a grade 9–12 program. One student said the program was great but you really had to commit yourself to doing it. If it wasn't for getting through the course in PLATO Learning curriculum, we would have lost many of these students."

■ **Tracy Britton, science teacher and course recovery program facilitator, North Side High School:**

North Side High School had 25 students participate in the first course recovery program. The students Tracy Britton saw enter her lab for the most part were not challenged to comprehend the subject matter but rather had poorly managed their time in previous courses. "These kids had made mistakes in the regular classroom and now realized they really had to buckle down to graduate," said Britton.

She didn't find it hard to get them committed to working on the PLATO Learning courses. The students shared with Tracy that they felt the coursework matched perfectly with what was going on in the regular classroom. "The computer was just more engaging and students saw their progress immediately, which served as an impetus to push them forward because they knew where they were in comparison to the end goal at all times," she said.

Britton felt that the PLATO program was "outstanding compared to what we have used in the past." Of the 25 students enrolled in her program, 20 credits were awarded.

■ **Carolyn Shaw, principal, Hillcrest High School:**

At Hillcrest High School, Principal Shaw had 19 students enroll in the course recovery program, which provided intervention for kids with difficulty in math and English. Hillcrest High started recovery this year but has used PLATO Learning for four years in the in-school suspension program. "I jumped on board when the opportunity to use it in credit recovery came up," said Shaw. She stayed late in the afternoons and came in on Saturdays to make sure the students had the opportunity to complete the courses—as long as they were committed. "They were there every time lab was open. I didn't need to call them; they came enthusiastically on their own," said Shaw.

Shaw found that the more encouragement she gave, the more students responded. "Our students were very motivated to complete the courses because they knew

they wouldn't have to come back another year. They were dependent on themselves, responsible for themselves, and that made a lot of difference." Of the 19 students enrolled, 10 were able to complete the courses in their entirety in the nine-week span.

"I am so grateful that our district decided to create the Secondary Course Recovery Program. It gives students an opportunity to make up for their past mistakes," said Shaw. The popularity of her program has spread across the high school, and she received phone calls afterwards from others who wanted to enroll.

Shaw is encouraged by the program's success. "I hope the district will keep it in place to give more students the opportunity. It is truly one of the best things I have seen in a long time," she said.

Districtwide Results

The district had 286 students participate in the Secondary Course Recovery Program in its first offering. Of those students, there were 170 course credits awarded. "MCS had a short time to get this implemented but has seen results in just nine weeks—a tribute to what can be accomplished throughout the school year and throughout the state," said Pope.

The program has received widespread buy in now that administrators can see what can be accomplished. "A few principals were not as keen on the idea of delivering course recovery through technology, but once they saw the results, high efficacy, and rigidity of the program they came on board. In fact, our staunchest naysayers changed once they actually looked at the software and the rigidity of the courses," said Bush.

Overall, the program was an innovative idea to provide a second chance for struggling learners or those who had made mistakes in their academic careers, and MCS hopes to continue to expand with a plan to extend the program to 9–11 grade students in the fall. "We commend Tennessee for their foresight to offer new strategies to reach these kids before we lose them to dropout or incarceration, which can often happen," said Pope. "We realized that it is never too late to start a course recovery program and that when given the chance, these kids can surprise us with what they can accomplish."

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CAROLYN SHAW,
PRINCIPAL, HILLCREST HIGH
SCHOOL