# The Use of Apex Learning for Credit Recovery in the High School Setting

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## Introduction

The issue of education is constantly in the media spotlight, especially as US educational reformers and legislators incessantly review regulations associated with the schooling of American youth. All American stakeholders in education aim to see a high proportion of students graduate. This goal starts when a child enters pre-k/kindergarten and increase once she starts high school in 9th grade. Once the child is in 9th grade, it is likely that s/he will not graduate in four years, especially when s/he is disabled. In our proposal, we will focus on the implementation of the APEX Learning program in a blended learning format during an extended school year as a strategy to increase the graduation rates.

## Rationale

In the US, education has long been tied to the economic growth and the level of development. In turn, economic growth is dependent upon a society of qualified individuals. Today's students must be prepared beyond the basics. The student must master critical thinking. National reformers and legislation have charged state and local stakeholders with preparing American youth for college and careers. One of the national education reform's objectives is to attain a high school graduation rate of 90% for the class of 2020. The most recent national graduation rate for the class of 2015 was 83.2% (Gradnation: America's Promise Alliance, 2017).

Over the past few years, states made progress in increasing graduation rates(U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2015). This increase in graduation rates is credited to the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) (U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2015). ACGR is a national measurement system that ensures accountability and whose measures are designed to reduce dropout rates (U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2015). For the 2015 time period, New Jersey public school's graduation rate was 89.7%.

Although this number is noteworthy, an objective appraisal of the subgroup performance shows a dismal performance.

According to GradNation's data, the largest gap among key sub-groups is between non-students with disabilities and students with disabilities (SWD). In 2015, non-SWD graduated at a rate of 91.84% whereas SWD's graduate rate was 78%. These percentages are disturbing. They call for an action for SWD if the national goal of seeing the class of 2020 graduate at 90% must be fulfilled. These percentages also highlight the value of preparing students for postsecondary and/or careers. Therefore, my proposal's focus is on the implementation of the APEX Learning program in a blended learning format during extended school year as a strategy to increase graduation rates.

**APEX Learning**

Many US school districts are met the challenges of students who drop out of school or fail courses. This situation puts these students off track. One of the federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind is that school districts are required to improve test scores and graduation rates. Federal, state, and local officials delegate building administrators the power of detailing specific interventions and strategies.

The suburban school in New Jersey for which this proposal has been drafted grapples with the problem of increasing graduation rates for students with disabilities. Addressing the issue of low graduation rates of SWD School X requires implementing an extended school year credit recovery program for 9$^{th}$ grade students through APEX Learning. Building a GradNation's report lists credit recovery as a strategy of helping students get back on track for graduation (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017). The use of this technology gives a quick and available access to information.

APEX Learning is an e-Learning solution that is situated within K-12 education. APEX offers its students the ability to attend courses asynchronously. This flexibility offers users the ability to attend courses anytime of the day and gives students many opportunities of completing schoolwork while juggling with other obligations. APEX offers a range of courses in Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Physical Education, Art, English, and Foreign Languages. APEX Learning takes a three-prong approach to learning and the success of students through effective curriculum, actionable data, and success management (APEX Learning, 2017).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is constructivism. In constructivism, a learner is positioned within a drivers' seat of learning. The learner creates his/her own understanding in response to the learning condition. This learning theory can be applied to the APEX Learning program in that student learning is scaffold and built upon previous learning. While using the APEX Learning program, students must stay active and engaged.

The above-theoretical framework is linked to the philosopher and educator, John Dewey. In "My Pedagogic Creed," Dewey discusses how preparing students for the future requires them to be trained to be thinkers and masters of their learning (1897). This method is in line with the 21st century learning. Technology and its applications in supporting education and life in general have now become a norm in our society. Furthermore, Dewey indicates that a school should be reflective of the current life. This is vital to the child. In some aspects, the US current education system is antiquated and behind the times. This is one of the main reasons that it does not work for all U.S. young students. The use of APEX Learning program is a technology that is reflective of the US society. That way, it has the potential to change the trajectory of learners who are off track for graduation.

**Instructional Systems Design**

The Hexagon tool was applied to this proposal whose focus is to implement the APEX Learning program in a blended learning format during extended school year for 9th graders as a strategy of increasing graduation rates.

School X's student management system was used to generate a report on all 9th grade students with disabilities who failed one to two courses during the academic school year. Twenty students were identified as meeting the criteria for participation. All students and their parents will be invited to participate in an open house meeting with building administrators, guidance counselors, and support teachers.

An APEX Learning representative who will conduct a program overview and simulation, the representative will facilitate the open house meeting. Building administrators will be responsible for discussing program expectations and requirements during the eight-week extended year program. Students and their parents will be required to sign a contract committing them to the program. Upon return of the student contract, an orientation day will be scheduled with the students and support teachers. Support teachers will include an Algebra, English, and special education teacher. A blended approach will be used with the APEX Learning Program. In a blended approach, there is a combination of face-to-face and online instruction (Dessoff, 2009). Students will be required to attend extended year from Monday to Thursday (9 a.m.-11 a.m.). During the scheduled time, the support teachers will provide students with assistance and monitor student learning and will act as facilitators between the school and APEX Learning. A building administrator will be assigned to monitor the program.

In Jones's study, the following themes emerged as attributes that led to the success of an online credit recovery class: student in control, quiet environment, self-paced, real time progress

monitoring, prescriptive assessments, and retaking assessments (2011). Likewise, Roblyer concluded that student and teacher interactions (progress monitoring) played a role in the student's academic success (2006). We will draw insights from both studies and use them in order to help students succeed in School X credit recovery program.

**Evaluation Plan**

The comprehensive goal of the extended year program is to ensure that students be able to achieve and retain any credits for the core academic subject with which they are struggling. We will use the Apex Learning system in a blended learning platform to enable students to succeed to the best of their abilities. This way, both the credit retention and the timely graduation of the students with disabilities will be achieved. By using Apex Learning as a platform for student achievement, development and as an instructional guide, the school will be able to constantly monitor the new extended year program.

The school has developed this program to ensure that our students can achieve the credits they lost due to ineffective learning practices that had been exhibited throughout the school year. The negative learning practices that the students have exhibited include poor attendance, lack of effort in their academic areas, excessive incomplete tasks, and a general lack of motivation towards the student's schoolwork. Although some of these concerns may be attributable to the students' disabilities, the summer program is intended to increase the student improvement and allow our SWD's to advance to their next academic grade. Other forementioned negative school behaviors will be addressed via the Apex Learning Systems blended learning system. As our students must follow the prescribed curriculum and program utilizing both online and face-to-face instructional time, there are built in supports that we will highlight in the implementation vignettes.

To evaluate the success and the feasibility for the continuation of the program year after year, this course will be frequently evaluated both formally and informally.

The formal evaluation will be conducted through a student survey that all students will be required to fill out at the completion of their summer program. A copy of this evaluation plan can be found in appendix A. This form has been developed and modified with the permission from the University of Wisconsin's, Blended Learning Toolkit (2017). The formal evaluation focuses on five areas, i.e., technology, instructional design, course structure, engagement, and student support. Students will rate each element on the evaluation on the scale of 1-5 ranging from never to consistently. The school's administrators will also complete formal evaluations. By using the customary school/teacher observation report that will judge the teacher's ability to be an effective face-to-face instructor.

The blending of the online and face-to-face styles will be informally evaluated by the results of the student activities, the students' grades, their effort levels, student time on task, and completion rate (Apex, 2017). All of the evaluation measure's aim is to facilitate improvements to the implementation as a new method for student achievement, effectiveness of information transmission, and for student satisfaction. Informal evaluations will also take place through random student opinion polls issued with Google Forms. Online informal observations will also be conducted by the school's administrative team by random observation and review of the online forums and discussion boards that the courses use to encourage the student participation and learning.

**Vignette**

With the government mandate for education reform to have the student graduation rate of 90% by the year 2020, all schools are striving to increase their students' ability to progress on

time. This program will successfully implement a credit recovery extended school year program for struggling students. It will facilitate the credit recoupment and grade recovery in order to give even SWD additional time to complete and/or make up missing course requirements. This strategy will allow SWD to advance at the same rate as their age appropriate classmates do. A bonus of any extended school year program that includes SWD is a reduction in academic regression that is a recurrent issue for many SWD (Donachie, 2015).

In its first year as a trial service before the large-scale roll out the next year, this summer program enrolled 20 Freshmen of School X, a suburban New Jersey School. Each of these students experienced academic problems in one of the core classes and needed to find a way to earn back credits. Otherwise, they would have to repeat in their next school year. The courses offered were Freshman English, Algebra I, Pre-Algebra, and Earth Science. The support teachers facilitated all course offerings. For SWD students who enrolled, the courses were modified and adapted to the specifications of the student's IEP with the help of a certified Teacher of Students with Disabilities.

The Apex Learning platform was used as the platform for the blended program. Students needed to attend classes in the school building on Monday's through Thursday''s from 8 am to 11am in a direct face-to-face instruction in their prescribed course of study. Throughout the trial program, the school administrators were frequently in contact with the support teachers, students, parents, and the Apex Learning technical coordinator.

Informal evaluations for the program began immediately with an interview with random students and with the teacher and administrator discussing the best practices that could be heeded for the following summer program years. At the end of the summer program, formal evaluations

that could be quantifiably measured were distributed and collected. Informal qualitative questionnaires were also distributed to the students through their Google Drives.

Thanks to the students' eagerness to advance and the assistance of the Apex technical team, all the students completed the majority of their assignments and educational program over the course of the summer. However, the students' continuing low motivation and the quality of work, two of our more disaffected students were unable to recoup their course credit. The school proudly announces that the program succeeded for 90 % of the students who enrolled in the blended learning summer program. Those 18 students completed enough work and received sufficient support through the blended learning program in order to complete their credit requirements and move on to their subsequent school grade.

Based on instances discussed in School X vis-à-vis the success of the blended learning platform, we can safely say that blended and online learning are effective tools for students who have a difficult time learning in the traditional environment, at least full time. Case studies from Massachusetts, Texas and California are additional evidence for my assertion. In Boston, the Apex platform increased graduation rates by 8% (2012). In Texas, the Apex platform helped students pass their mandated testing and attain original high school credit before attending summer school or additional school year programs (2016). In California where a previous standard summer school program became ineffective, an online self-paced instructional technique reinvigorated students and helped most of summer-program students succeed and obtain their high school diplomas (2010).

**Reflection to Selected Class Readings:**

While comparing the use of blended learning to Wayne Au's "Teaching under the new Taylorism…," We sensed that blended learning can be listed among the models that our

educational forefathers envisioned and that aimed to prepare students for the workforce as labor ready individuals (2011). That way, the blended learning systems may be as scientifically managed as Bobbitt's curriculum design was (Au, W., 2011). Today, educational leaders strive to control the educational system through high stakes testing and educational requirements such as the development of students' workforce skills. Through blended learning and curriculum design, teachers and Ed. Tech. leaders are using new relevant tools in order to encourage student engagement and allow for a greater level of freedom wherever education occurs. However, for the public school systems, the need to be judged by a high stake testing system still firmly exists. Through the increase of technology and student-focused education, students are attempting to seize control of their educational careers. However, the school curricular and testing constraints are forcing the US public educational system to remain static and controlled. In other words, these constraints are not allowing the US educational system to move forward to adaptive and technologically advanced systems. Worse, there is a barrier to the large-scale adoption of adaptive learning systems (Pugliese, L., 2016). There are two reasons thereof. First, schools have been developed as standardized entities and not geared towards individualization. Second, faculty are not ready for students to progress at vastly different rates.

Our final view on our previous class readings that we would like to discuss is the SAMR model and the Larry Cuban article (Cuban, L., 2016). The SAMR model has been a large part of this course. As its implications can be justly felt in the area of blended learning, we would like to SAMR this summer course and determine where it would fall on the models framework. For this blended learning course, the APEX Learning system will be both the Substitution and Augmentation of the classes' textbook and any notebooks (Puentedura, 2009). The Augmentation is the fact that the digital textbook will have additional resources and functional

improvement on a static textbook. The Modification is where the teacher comes back into the picture of the SAMR model. With the help of the instructor, the digital platform can easily fall within the Modification level of the model. If students are given the tech tool alone without guidance, they will only use the tech tool up to the point of Augmentation. If the students have someone with whom they can journey and explore the tool and its abundant uses and with a teacher who is encouraging the growth, then the Modifications will be obvious. The Modifications will appear as students in Geography begin to use Google Earth for flyovers as well as the digital map provided by the Apex platform. Redefinition in a summer credit recovery class may be difficult to attain. If the students spend only a couple of days a week in the presence of the teacher the students, they may be unwilling to invest their time and effort in the redefinition. However, in a blended classroom where there is frequent and regular contact with an instructor/facilitator, we can envision the same Geography class reinventing the curriculum and learning and understanding better than a gifted and talented traditional classroom could be achieved. we sense that the advancement of the SAMR model for a blended learning classroom has much to do with the instructor/facilitator involved with the students.

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Appendix A:

DoIT Academic Technology
1305 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706
Email: academictech@doit.wisc.edu

To whom it may concern,

We would like permission to use your course evaluation scorecard. We are developing a summer program using a blended learning curriculum and we would like to gather significant student and educator feedback as we work to improve the design of our curriculum.
We have found your scorecard while searching for evaluation tools and are requesting permission to use and adapt your tool to meet our purposes of evaluation.

Thank you for your response,

Christopher Farrell and Patrick Holness
Administrators of Summer Program
Original scorecard may be found at:
https://blendedtoolkit.wisc.edu/how/design/evaluation/scorecard/

# COURSE EVALUATION SCORECARD

Please score each element on a scale of 1-5
1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = consistently

## TECHNOLOGY

| ITEM | ELEMENT | SCORE |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | The teacher has received support in the development and use of new technologies deployed in their blended course. | |
| 2 | The teacher has selected technologies that facilitates the achievement of identified learning outcomes, delivery of course content, and facilitation of active learning as to prevent the unnecessary use of technology. | |
| 3 | The teacher has created instructional materials that are easily accessible to all students. | |

## INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

| ITEM | ELEMENT | SCORE |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | The teacher has developed a well thought out program of study to ensure students develop the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the goals of the course. | |
| 2 | The teacher has designed the blended course as a cohesive whole, incorporating and connecting both online and face-to-face experiences. | |
| 3 | The blended course materials (both online and in-class) course assignments, and course syllabus are reviewed to ensure they meet the identified learning outcomes. | |
| 4 | The teacher has designed the course to be student centered and to foster active learning. | |
| 5 | The blended course promotes both student-student, student-content, and student-teacher interactions. | |

## COURSE STRUCTURE

| ITEM | ELEMENT | SCORE |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | The blended course includes a syllabus outlining course objectives, unit objectives, and evaluation methods. | |
| 2 | The teacher has ensured all students, regardless of location, have access to learning materials used in the blended course. | |
| 3 | The teacher has communicated expectations for student assignment completion, grading policy, and teacher response rate in the blended course syllabus. | |
| 4 | The teacher has provided links to or an explanation of technical support resources for technologies used in the blended course. | |
| 5 | The teacher has communicated rules and standards for appropriate student behavior and/or code of ethics in the blended course syllabus. | |
| 6 | The teacher has ensured instructional materials are easily accessible by all students with disabilities. | |
| 7 | The teacher has created a visually appealing and easily navigable blended course space. | |

## ENGAGEMENT

| ITEM | ELEMENT | SCORE |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | The teacher facilitates appropriate student-student, student-content, and student-teacher engagements. | |
| 2 | The teacher feedback on student assignments and questions is constructive, actionable, and provided in a timely manner. | |
| 3 | The teacher facilitates engaging, learner-centered experiences in both online and face-to-face activities. | |
| 4 | The teacher provides students an understanding of the designed learning pathway and the learning objectives supported by activities. | |
| 5 | The teacher builds connections between online and face-to-face activities to present the course as a coherent learning environment. | |

## STUDENT SUPPORT

| ITEM | ELEMENT | SCORE |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Prior to the class, students are provided information regarding required course materials. | |
| 2 | At the beginning of the course, the teacher helps students understand the ways in which the blended course will operate for students (handing in materials, participating in online and face-to-face activities, technologies used, etc). | |
| 3 | Throughout the course, the teacher provides students opportunities for training and information they will need to secure required materials through electronic databases and other resources. | |
| 4 | Throughout the course, the teacher provides students appropriate training assistance and technical support for technologies they need to use. | |
| 5 | Throughout the course, the teacher is available and responsive to students questions. | |