

Case Study

Utah Online

WASHINGTON COUNTY, UTAH

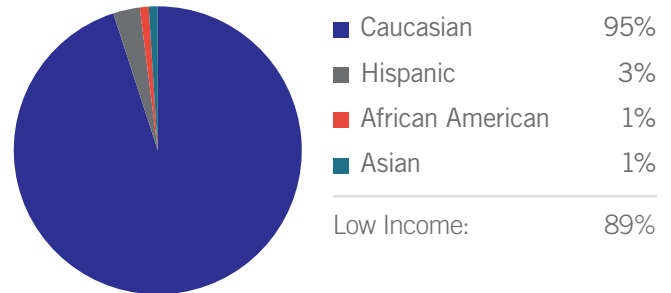
Can a blended learning program help reengage at-risk students who need to make up failed courses?

Challenge: A group of students were persistently failing courses and were at risk of dropping out of high school.

Solution: A blended learning program to help students immediately recover lost credits, master content, and graduate on time.

Outcome: After implementing Edgenuity courses for two years, graduation rates increased from 76 percent in 2012 to 88 percent in 2014, and students' ACT scores were higher.

School Demographics



Background

Developed in Washington County, Utah, to serve students around the state virtually, Utah Online has been in operation since 2002 as a K–8 online school. In 2011, the school grew to include a virtual high school with 60 students, using Edgenuity. The program now serves 150 students from across Utah who are fully online, and another 850 students from Washington County in a blended learning program. The Washington County School District serves more than 26,000 students in grades K–12. Eighty-nine percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

While the virtual portion of Utah Online serves a cross-section of students, from professional athletes and actors to homeschooled students and students who struggle in a traditional classroom environment, the blended learning portion of the program is targeted at two distinct groups—students who require immediate credit recovery, and students who are eager to take on additional coursework and graduate early. Both blended and virtual learning students are served by an online staff of 15 full-time teachers and 10 trained mentors.



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Lisa Mitchell, Academic Counselor, Washington County School District

Building a Culture of Success

In 2010, a group of high school-age students with just a fourth-grade formal education enrolled in Washington County Public Schools. The students attended public high school during the day, but needed “a significant amount of remediation,” says Lisa Mitchell, an Academic Counselor and teacher in the district. “So we used an online program after school and on weekends to get them up to speed.” After witnessing the “positive possibility” of blended learning, the district opened its existing all-online program—using Edgenuity—to students in Washington County’s seven brick-and-mortar high schools.

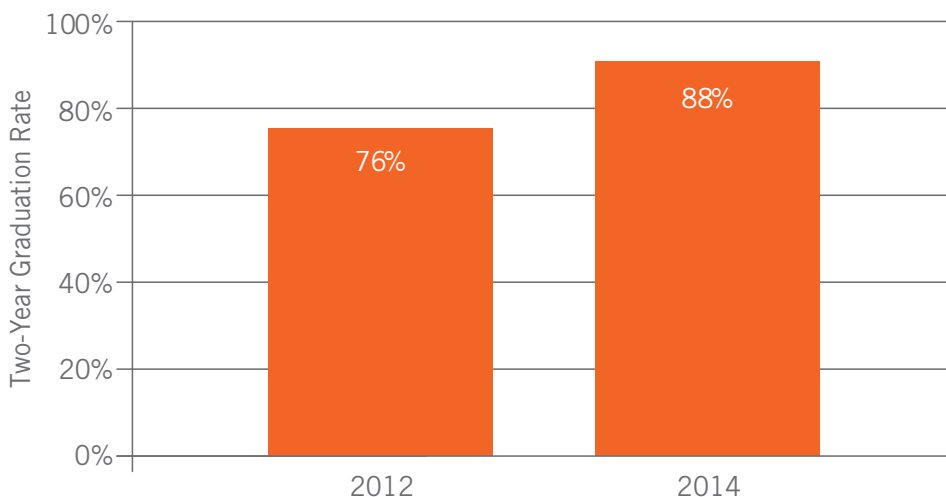
“We knew that the program worked,” Mitchell explains. “We’d been running a fully online school with it, and we knew the students were engaged and the curriculum had integrity. So why not try it for credit recovery?” In school year 2011-2012, Washington County implemented Edgenuity as part of a blended curriculum for credit recovery, original credit, and special education students.

Over the next two academic years, Utah Online was restructured to include remediation for more than 120 students a year. “The moment they start to struggle, we can catch them,” Mitchell says. “They are immediately placed in credit recovery during their study period. Where they might have failed 9th grade English before, now they’re recovering content, getting right back on track, and moving on to 10th grade.”

At the same time, blended learning is opening up additional educational options for students who are eager for more advanced curriculum. “Things that students would never have been able to study before, they can study now . . . and successfully,” Mitchell says. “They can have a full load of in-person classes and take that extra class online to stack their classes, graduate early, and get to college. Whatever their goals, we can help them achieve them.”

As part of the program, Utah Online offers classes to students between May and September. Classes are fairly evenly split between credit recovery and original credit work. The summer Edgenuity programs have an impressive completion rate—93 percent for students recovering credit, and 83 percent for students attempting to complete original coursework. “There are amazing opportunities for kids online,” Mitchell says.

“It’s not only about higher graduation rates,” she adds—though graduation rates at the district have increased from 76 percent in 2012 to 88 percent in 2014. “It’s also about higher ACT scores and kids who can happily say, ‘I really learned something!’”



A Change in Culture, Conversation, and Expectations

To ensure that the program works, Utah Online and Washington County changed their focus from credit to content. “We had a shift in terminology that was integral to our success,” Mitchell explains. “Credit is the byproduct of content, not the other way around.”

Once the district began to focus on content recovery, it became clear that Edgenuity was the right solution for students. The program’s focus on comprehension, using rich videos combined with text, is essential to student success, says Mitchell. “It makes it easier for students to understand what they are supposed to be learning, which leaves room for classroom mentors and virtual teachers to do the work of teaching.” Classroom mentors on site are ensuring that students are comfortable with the content, and virtual teachers are stepping in the moment students start to struggle.

Expectations at Utah Online are high. Students are encouraged to complete one quarter’s worth of work in nine weeks, which can be challenging, “particularly with students who are disengaged, from broken homes, or suffer from low self-esteem,” Mitchell says. “The trick is maintaining a personal connection with students and their supporters—family, teachers, coaches, whomever. And, of course, with the kids themselves—engagement equals agency. This isn’t just credit recovery. This is a team effort to get kids to graduate. And it’s working.”