From Compliance to Mastery: A Learner-Centered Redesign of the Credit Recovery Support Pathway

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Introduction and Design Context

Credit recovery provides an important second-chance pathway for high school students who have failed required courses or fallen behind in credits. In many schools, online or blended credit recovery allows students to regain credits without repeating an entire traditional course. This flexibility can reduce scheduling barriers, help students remain on a graduation pathway, and allow schools to serve more students than a fully individualized model might permit.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) describes credit recovery as a widespread practice in U.S. public high schools, frequently supported through online or digital coursework (Clements & Rickles, 2024). Federal research has also found that online credit recovery can increase the likelihood that students recover credits, while raising continued questions about rigor, longer-term achievement, and whether course completion represents meaningful learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The design problem addressed in this case is not that credit recovery should be eliminated. Students need a realistic way to recover from course failure. The concern is that completion of a recovery course does not always make durable learning visible. A student may complete modules, pass platform quizzes, and regain a credit while still struggling to explain or apply foundational concepts from the course.

This concern grew from prior school-based mentoring experience. In direct work with students, some learners had progressed into later sections of self-paced recovery courses but struggled when asked questions involving material from earlier modules. Further conversation sometimes revealed that students had used generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) or other shortcuts to pass quizzes without understanding the underlying content. GenAI is not the center of this design case, but it makes the assessment problem more urgent because students may be able to move through digital tasks without demonstrating independent understanding.

This design case examines a proposed public high school credit recovery support pathway informed by prior mentoring experience with students at Oceanside High School.

Oceanside High School's Fresh Start program serves as an illustrative pilot context, but this project does not claim to represent, replace, or directly modify the district's proprietary credit recovery platform. Instead, the redesign focuses on the learner-support pathway surrounding existing credit recovery coursework.

The broader organizational goal of credit recovery is to help students regain credits, reduce the consequences of course failure, and remain on track for graduation. The learner-level goal should go further. Students should leave the experience with stronger understanding, clearer learning strategies, and greater ability to seek support and monitor their own progress. The purpose of this redesign is to bring those goals into better alignment.

Current Learning Experience

The target learners are high school students enrolled in credit recovery, particularly students who have repeatedly struggled academically, become disengaged from school, or accumulated missing credits. Their prior knowledge, skills, and attitudes are likely to vary widely. Some students may have isolated content gaps caused by absence, disruption, or failure in one portion of a course. Others may have long-standing gaps in foundational knowledge. Learners may also differ in reading confidence, language background, disability status, executive-function skills, time management, help-seeking behavior, persistence, digital literacy, and ability to use online tools for meaningful learning.

The emotional and relational context also matters. Students in credit recovery may feel discouraged, embarrassed, bored, resistant, or disconnected from school. In prior mentoring experience, some students appeared to experience education as something being done to them rather than something in which they had meaningful ownership. A stronger support pathway should address academic and self-regulation barriers without treating students as incapable.

A typical credit recovery pathway begins when a student fails or falls behind in a required course. The student is then identified as credit deficient, assigned to an online or blended recovery option, and expected to complete modules, practice activities, quizzes, or other

platform requirements. When the required work is completed and the student meets the platform or district's passing criteria, the missing credit may be restored.

In an illustrative Fresh Start context, the existing experience may include self-paced modules, digital readings, instructional videos, practice activities, quizzes, a progress dashboard, teacher or mentor support, support-class periods, worksheets, attendance monitoring, and school-generated progress reports. The public Oceanside High School webpage describes Fresh Start as an opportunity for students who may be credit deficient to regain lost credits during the traditional school day (Oceanside High School, n.d.).

This system has meaningful strengths. It gives students another route toward graduation, offers scheduling flexibility, and allows schools to use digital materials at scale. Teachers, counselors, mentors, translators, and support staff may also provide valuable human assistance around the platform. The redesign should preserve these strengths rather than treating the current experience as a complete failure.

The central issue is not whether each digital asset is well designed in isolation. It is whether the assets, human supports, assessments, and learner needs are aligned as an instructional system. Heinrich (2022) argues that online credit recovery is more likely to benefit learners when platform access is paired with instructional support, pacing guidance, and opportunities for interaction. In that sense, the most important design gap may not be the existence of digital credit recovery itself, but the support pathway students move through before, during, and after platform completion.

Current instructional assets may include vendor- or district-controlled online course modules, digital readings, instructional videos, practice activities, module quizzes, pretests, progress dashboards, teacher-facing reports, support-class worksheets, and human support from teachers, counselors, mentors, or translators. These tools may work well for students who have limited content gaps, are comfortable learning independently, or mainly need scheduling

flexibility. However, the same tools may function differently for students who lack prerequisite knowledge, confidence, self-regulation, or a clear sense of relevance.

Existing quizzes, pretests, module completion indicators, and platform assessments may measure course progress and selected content knowledge. They do not necessarily provide sufficient evidence that a learner can explain, retain, or apply essential concepts. A progress dashboard can show that a student has completed work, but it may not show why mistakes occurred, what support was used, whether the learner can explain the concept independently, or what should happen next.

Copyright and accessibility considerations also shape the redesign. Internal Fresh Start modules, readings, videos, quizzes, dashboards, and assignments are likely governed by vendor or district licenses. Their specific ownership and permitted uses would need to be verified through district contracts, platform terms, and local policy before implementation. The proposed redesign does not copy, adapt, or redistribute those materials. Existing platform content would remain inside the approved system and continue to be used in its original licensed context.

The new support assets would be created as original materials. These include the learner intake, learning plan, module reflection, quiz recovery reflection, progress checkpoint, mastery artifact instructions and rubric, and final reflection. Creating original support assets lowers copyright risk and allows the materials to be revised for accessibility and usability. Supplemental instructional videos and open educational resources (OER) should be documented separately because their license terms, attribution requirements, and accessibility features would need to be verified before use.

A complete technical accessibility audit of the internal Fresh Start platform was not possible because the platform screens, vendor documentation, and district accessibility records were not available for direct inspection. Therefore, this case does not claim that the existing platform lacks accessibility features. The more defensible concern involves the accessibility and

usability of the broader learner experience. Students may be technically able to open a course and complete tasks while still facing barriers related to language, cognitive load, prerequisite knowledge, unclear directions, weak feedback, or uncertainty about how to seek support.

The National AEM Center at CAST (2021) emphasizes accessible structure, descriptive navigation, alt text, readable typography, captions, transcripts, and compatibility with assistive technologies. Zaharias (2009) further argues that e-learning usability should treat the user as a learner, not merely as a software user. In this context, usability includes whether students understand what a module is asking them to learn, recognize when they are confused, know what to do next, and can convert progress information into realistic action.

Description of the Redesign

The redesign retains the existing credit recovery platform but adds a structured learner-support pathway around it. The main design insight is that the software may not be the central problem. The gap may exist in what happens before and during platform use: diagnosis, planning, reflection, targeted support, feedback, and evidence of mastery.

The proposed pathway has four high-level stages: diagnostic intake, targeted intervention and planning, supported recovery, and mastery evidence and transfer. Within those stages, the redesign uses seven learner-facing components: Learner Intake Reflection, Credit Recovery Learning Plan, Module Reflection / Prerequisite Check, Quiz Recovery Reflection, Progress Checkpoint and Strategy Reflection, Mastery Artifact, and Final Reflection and Transfer Plan. These components shift the experience from a narrow focus on compliance and completion toward a fuller view of student progress.

By the end of the redesigned credit recovery support pathway, students will be able to:

1. Identify at least two academic, personal, or process-related barriers that have affected their progress in the credit recovery course.
2. Create a credit recovery learning plan that includes a course goal, weekly work target, support strategy, and help-seeking plan.

3. Document the use of one targeted learning strategy while completing Fresh Start module work.
4. Create a mastery artifact that explains or applies one essential course concept.
5. Explain progress, remaining challenges, and one strategy for future coursework.

These outcomes use measurable learner actions and avoid treating credit completion alone as the primary evidence of success.

The authentic assessment is a Credit Recovery Learning Portfolio. Rather than relying only on quiz scores or platform completion data, the portfolio asks students to produce evidence of their learning process. The portfolio includes the learner intake reflection, credit recovery learning plan, module reflection or prerequisite check, progress checkpoint, quiz recovery reflection when needed, mastery artifact, and final reflection and transfer plan.

The central artifact is the Mastery Artifact. Students create a product that explains or applies one essential concept from the recovered course. Depending on the course and learner need, the artifact may be a worked example, annotated problem solution, written explanation, visual diagram, revised writing sample, short slide presentation, audio explanation, mini-conference, or applied project. Authentic assessment asks learners to use knowledge in a meaningful context rather than only respond to isolated test items (Messier, 2022). The portfolio is authentic because it requires behaviors that can transfer beyond the immediate course: identifying obstacles, planning work, seeking support, applying strategies, explaining understanding, using feedback, and reflecting on progress.

In the pilot, the Credit Recovery Learning Portfolio would not replace official district or vendor requirements for earning credit. Students would still complete the required Fresh Start modules, quizzes, and platform expectations. However, the portfolio would function as the local support-pathway completion requirement used by the teacher or facilitator to document learner readiness, support use, and evidence of mastery. This distinction matters because the redesign is not attempting to change the district's credit-granting system directly. Instead, it creates an

additional layer of evidence that helps staff determine whether students are only progressing through modules or also developing transferable understanding.

GenAI may be used within clear boundaries. Students may use approved tools to request explanations, clarify vocabulary, translate directions, generate practice questions, brainstorm study strategies, organize a plan, or receive feedback on an explanation they created. Students may not use GenAI to complete personal reflections for them, generate an entire mastery artifact without revision and explanation, fabricate progress, or bypass evidence of independent understanding. When GenAI is used, students should disclose the tool, describe how it was used, and explain what they can now do independently.

Table 1

Current Experience and Redesign Decisions

Current element	Design decision	Rationale
Existing platform modules	Retain	The modules provide the licensed content pathway and are already integrated into the district's credit recovery system.
Existing quizzes and pretests	Retain and supplement	They provide useful progress information, but additional evidence is needed to show reasoning, transfer, and durable mastery.
Progress dashboard	Retain and supplement	Completion data supports pacing, but it should be paired with reflection on confidence, understanding, and next steps.
Teacher, mentor, counselor, and translator support	Retain and structure	Human support is already valuable, but consistent prompts and checkpoints can improve alignment across staff and students.
Learner intake and planning	Add	Course failure alone does not explain the academic, motivational, language, attendance, or self-regulation barriers affecting the learner.
Reflection and quiz recovery	Add	Short, evidence-based reflections can turn mistakes and confusion into learning decisions rather than simple retries.

Final evidence of learning	Supplement	A learner-created mastery artifact provides evidence that cannot be reduced to a completion percentage or quiz score.

The redesign aligns with ADDIE because it moves from analysis of learner needs, current assets, copyright constraints, accessibility, and assessment gaps into a designed support pathway with measurable outcomes and authentic assessment. Development would involve creating the original support assets, rubric, facilitator guide, accessible templates, and feedback tools. Implementation would begin with a limited pilot, and evaluation would examine clarity, impact, and feasibility before broader adoption.

The classroom teacher would remain responsible for instructional judgment, feedback on learning evidence, and final review of the mastery artifact. A mentor, support-class teacher, counselor, or designated intervention staff member could facilitate the learner intake, weekly checkpoints, and reflection review. Counselors or graduation coordinators would help confirm credit status and placement needs, while the project lead would prepare the templates, train pilot staff, troubleshoot implementation issues, and collect evaluation data. Clarifying these roles is important because the support pathway depends on human facilitation, not just the completion of forms.

Learning Experience Mapping and Alignment

The redesign uses backward design. The learning outcomes identify what students should be able to do, the support assets and activities create opportunities to practice those actions, and the portfolio provides evidence aligned with each outcome.

Table 2

Condensed Learning Experience Map

Phase	Aligned outcome	Main assets and activities	Learner-created evidence
Orientation and Intake	LO1: Identify barriers	Orientation guide, learner intake, initial conversation	Learner Intake Reflection identifying course status, barriers, confidence, and support needs
Planning and Help-Seeking	LO2: Create a plan	Learning Plan Template, strategy menu, teacher/mentor review	Credit Recovery Learning Plan with goal, weekly target, support strategy, and help-seeking plan
Module Work and Prerequisite Awareness	LO3: Document strategy use	Module Reflection, Prerequisite Check, guided help-seeking prompts	Short reflection naming the module concept, prerequisite need, confusion point, and selected strategy
Quiz Recovery	LO3 and preparation for LO4	Quiz Recovery Reflection, approved AI-use guidance, teacher feedback	Evidence of what was missed, what was reviewed, which strategy was used, and what can now be explained
Progress and Mastery Planning	LO1, LO3, and LO4	Progress Checkpoint, platform data review, barrier review, mastery artifact choice menu	Progress record connecting completion status, current barriers, confidence, concepts needing review, and next steps
Mastery Artifact Creation	LO4: Create mastery evidence	Artifact prompt, accessible rubric, feedback and revision	Worked example, explanation, diagram, presentation, audio response, project, or conference evidence
Reflection and Transfer	LO5: Explain progress and transfer	Final Reflection and Transfer Plan	Explanation of growth, remaining challenge, and strategy for future coursework

Each portfolio component exists because it provides evidence aligned with a specific outcome. The intake measures barrier identification. The learning plan measures planning. The module and quiz reflections measure documented strategy use. The progress checkpoint revisits barriers because student needs can shift over time. The mastery artifact measures whether the learner can explain or apply an essential concept. The final reflection measures progress awareness and future transfer.

The redesign also supports Universal Design for Learning by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression. Learners may access guidance through structured text, examples, verbal explanation, bilingual support, or captioned media. Students may demonstrate mastery through different formats while being held to the same essential learning standard.

Accessibility is addressed through structured headings, meaningful labels, readable typography, sufficient spacing, descriptive links, plain-language instructions, captioned media, transcripts, keyboard-accessible tools, and multiple response options. Original support assets can be tested and revised before implementation. Existing vendor assets would require separate verification with the district or platform provider. Copyright compliance is supported by retaining licensed platform materials inside their approved system and creating original support assets. Supplemental videos and OER resources would be selected only after confirming ownership, license terms, attribution requirements, accessibility, and permitted use.

Implementation and Evaluation Plan

The redesigned support pathway should begin with a limited pilot. A pilot allows the school to test the experience, identify problems, collect feedback, and revise the design before asking more staff or students to adopt it. A reasonable initial pilot might include one or two teachers, mentors, or support-class facilitators; approximately 15 to 30 students; and a four- to six-week support cycle. The pilot should include students with varied academic histories, credit

status, confidence, language needs, disability-related needs, motivation levels, and comfort with digital learning.

The redesign is intentionally low-cost because it uses an existing credit recovery platform and commonly available school tools. A preliminary pilot may require one learning designer or teacher-leader serving as project lead; one to two credit recovery teachers, support teachers, mentors, or counselors; limited consultation from an accessibility specialist, English learner specialist, special education representative, or school technology staff; access to the current Fresh Start platform; and Google Docs, Google Forms, Microsoft 365, or the school LMS. If stipends, translation, accessibility consultation, or additional planning time are needed, a preliminary pilot budget of approximately $500 to $2,500 may be reasonable. These figures are exploratory and would need to be adjusted to local salary structures, district policy, and the final pilot scope.

Before the pilot, participating staff would receive a brief orientation to the pathway, purpose of each support asset, GenAI boundaries, accessibility expectations, portfolio rubric, and feedback procedures. The project lead should remain available during implementation to address broken links, unclear directions, accessibility issues, or other problems that can be corrected in the field.

Table 3

Preliminary Implementation Timeline

Phase	Timeline	Key actions	Primary roles
Preparation	Weeks 1–2	Finalize support templates, review copyright and accessibility, prepare staff guide, confirm pilot group	Project lead, teacher, counselor, accessibility/technology support
Staff Orientation	Week 3	Review purpose of pathway, portfolio components, GenAI boundaries, facilitation routines, and evaluation tools	Project lead and pilot staff

Student Launch	Week 4	Introduce pathway, complete learner intake, create initial learning plan	Students, teacher, mentor/support facilitator
Pilot Implementation	Weeks 5–8	Complete module reflections, quiz recovery reflections when needed, progress checkpoints, and mastery artifact planning	Students, teacher, mentor/support facilitator
Mastery Review	Week 9	Review mastery artifacts, final reflections, and portfolio evidence	Teacher, student, support facilitator
Evaluation and Revision	Weeks 9–10	Analyze survey data, portfolio completion, rubric scores, staff feedback, and implementation barriers	Project lead and pilot staff

The evaluation plan would combine formative evaluation criteria with an adapted use of Kirkpatrick's Four Levels. Formative evaluation would focus on clarity, impact, and feasibility. Clarity asks whether students and staff understand the purpose, instructions, prompts, and assessment criteria. Impact asks whether the supports help students identify barriers, use strategies, seek help, and create stronger evidence of learning. Feasibility asks whether the pathway can be implemented within available time, staffing, technology, and budget.

Kirkpatrick's levels could be adapted to this setting. Level 1, Reaction, would examine student and staff perceptions of usefulness, clarity, workload, dignity, and engagement. Level 2, Learning, would examine the quality of learner intake responses, learning plans, strategy documentation, quiz recovery reflections, and mastery artifacts. Level 3, Behavior, would look for evidence that students begin using strategies, seeking support, reviewing weak concepts, or explaining their thinking with less prompting. Level 4, Results, would consider credit recovery progress, course completion, fewer unresolved prerequisite gaps, and possible improvement in later coursework. These organizational results should be interpreted cautiously because attendance, staffing, prior achievement, and many other factors influence them.

Potential data sources include student and staff surveys, open-ended survey questions, teacher or mentor focus groups, student conferences, completion rates for each support asset, mastery artifact rubric scores, samples of learner reflections, documented GenAI use, existing platform progress data, common skipped components, and staff estimates of time required to facilitate the pathway.

Student survey questions may include whether the learner intake helped students identify what they needed to work on, whether the learning plan helped them stay organized, whether reflection checkpoints helped them notice confusion or seek support, whether the mastery artifact helped them explain or apply something they learned, and whether the portfolio felt manageable alongside Fresh Start module work. Open-ended questions may ask which part of the pathway was most helpful, what felt confusing or unnecessary, and what would make the process more useful or respectful.

Staff survey questions may ask whether the pathway helped make student needs more visible, whether the portfolio evidence gave useful information beyond platform completion data, whether the process was realistic to facilitate within available time, and whether the directions, templates, and rubric were clear enough to use with students.

Evaluation should lead directly to revision. A clarity problem may require a small wording or navigation change. A feasibility problem may require fewer checkpoints, shorter prompts, or a smaller facilitator role. A lack of impact may require a more significant redesign of the support pathway. GenAI may assist with organizing de-identified feedback or creating alternate accessible formats, but human review remains necessary. AI should not make final judgments about student mastery, teacher performance, disability needs, or program effectiveness.

Challenges, Barriers, and Shortcomings

The redesign addresses one part of a larger educational system. It cannot independently solve teacher burnout, chronic absenteeism, staffing shortages, grading policy, poverty, disability-service gaps, weak prior instruction, or a student's broader relationship with school.

Teacher workload is one of the most significant implementation risks. Even short reflections and checkpoints can become burdensome if teachers are expected to review them without additional time or support. If the pathway is perceived as another compliance requirement, staff may implement it inconsistently or students may complete the forms superficially.

Student resistance is another risk. Students may view reflection as unnecessary when their immediate goal is to recover the credit. Reflection prompts must therefore remain short, concrete, connected to actual course evidence, and followed by meaningful feedback. Otherwise, students may learn to provide the answers adults expect without changing their learning behavior.

The portfolio's relationship to credit recovery outcomes would also need to be handled carefully. If the portfolio is treated as completely optional, students who only want the credit may ignore it. If it is treated as a punitive extra requirement, students may resent it. The pilot would need to frame the portfolio as part of the local support process: not a replacement for Fresh Start completion, but a way to document readiness, strategy use, and mastery evidence before the support pathway is considered complete.

The redesign also relies on human facilitation. A well-designed intake or progress form cannot replace a teacher, mentor, or counselor who notices patterns, asks follow-up questions, and helps a student act on the information. If those conversations do not occur, the support assets may become paperwork rather than an instructional intervention.

Several implementation issues would need attention before a real pilot. If Google Forms, Google Docs, or similar tools are used to collect learner reflections, the school would need to confirm that the process follows district privacy rules and protects sensitive student information. Families may also need a brief explanation of the support pathway so they understand that the portfolio is intended to support learning and credit recovery rather than create an additional punishment for students who are already behind. The redesign also creates a coordination

challenge because the Fresh Start platform and the support portfolio would likely exist in separate systems. This separation is manageable in a small pilot, but it could become more difficult at scale unless staff have a clear workflow for connecting platform progress data with portfolio evidence.

GenAI creates both opportunity and risk. It may help students access explanations, translation, examples, and practice. It may also allow them to bypass thinking. Disclosure requirements and oral or written explanation checks can reduce this risk, but no procedure can guarantee that all submitted work reflects independent learning.

The design does not directly change the internal Fresh Start modules, quizzes, dashboard, or vendor-controlled assessment logic. If major weaknesses exist inside those materials, a surrounding support pathway can only partially address them. Finally, the project is based on prior mentoring experience, public information, research, and a proposed pilot context. It has not yet been implemented or empirically evaluated. Claims about effectiveness must therefore remain preliminary until pilot data are available.

Designer's Reflection

This project changed how I think about redesign. My first instinct was to focus on the visible system: the platform, modules, quizzes, and recovery process. Over time, the project became more focused on the relationships between those parts and the supports surrounding them.

The strongest conclusion I reached is that the software may not be the main problem. A school can have useful content, flexible technology, progress dashboards, teachers, mentors, and intervention periods while still producing an experience organized primarily around compliance. The design challenge is to help those pieces work together around actual learning.

I also developed a more complicated understanding of assets and artifacts. At the beginning of the course, I thought about assets mostly as materials: videos, worksheets, templates, documents, and digital resources. I now see them more as parts of a larger learning

system. An intake form is not valuable simply because it exists. A reflection prompt is not valuable just because it asks a good question. A mastery artifact is not valuable only because it looks different from a quiz. These assets matter when they shape better conversations, better decisions, and better evidence of learning.

This project also changed how I think about accessibility. Accessibility includes captions, structure, contrast, screen readers, and usable documents, but it also includes whether a learner understands what is happening, knows how to ask for help, and has a meaningful way to demonstrate capability. A technically accessible system can still be cognitively, relationally, or organizationally difficult to use.

The copyright and asset-management portions of the course also made the design more realistic. Because the existing Fresh Start modules and platform materials are likely vendor- or district-controlled, it would not be appropriate to assume they can be copied, modified, or redistributed. That constraint shaped the final design in a productive way. Instead of trying to redesign the proprietary platform, the project focuses on original support assets that can be created, reviewed, revised, and managed more responsibly.

This design case also reinforced the importance of humility in learning design. Adding forms and checkpoints does not automatically create mastery. Implementation quality, teacher capacity, student trust, and organizational culture may matter as much as the artifacts themselves. A strong design must be specific enough to guide practice but flexible enough to change after contact with real learners and educators.

The most important growth for me was recognizing that learning design is not only about creating better materials. It is about designing conditions where those materials can actually support learning. For future projects, I want to continue exploring mastery-based learning, AI-supported mentoring, learner agency, and the design of systems that help students understand their own learning. This case could become a portfolio project or a future capstone direction if the support assets are developed, piloted, and revised with a real school partner.

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