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Second chances; Credit recovery program offers way for students to make up work without retaking the whole course, writes Joanne Laucius.

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen / Rhonda-Lee Simmonds, 18, a Grade 12 student at Notre Dame High School, has benefitted from the school's credit recovery program thanks to those who got her to return to school, including her teacher, Sonia Palumbo, left.

Teacher Joyce Wagland has always allowed students to hand in assignments late, as long as they finished the missing work in front of her.

Wagland believes in second chances, which is why the former English department head signed on to be a credit recovery teacher at Woodroffe High School. And she says a controversial provincial policy that gives students second chances at missed deadlines and tests solidifies something teachers have been doing for years.

"In the real world, if you make a mistake, you get a second chance," she says. "You get second chances all over the place."

Credit recovery allows high school students who have acquired some of the necessary knowledge to redo the elements they missed and get their credit without taking the course all over again. It's part of a package of initiatives aimed at increasing Ontario's five-year graduate rate to 85 per cent in two years from 68 per cent five years ago.

It's also part of a world-wide movement that insists all students must succeed. And not just to be nice and inflate government graduation targets, say proponents.

"You can't give up on them when they're teenagers," says Woodroffe principal Renald Cousineau. "I see it as a moral imperative not to give up on students."

Consultant Damian Cooper, who has advised the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board on assessing and evaluating student achievement, argues that in today's knowledge economy every student needs to leave high school with literacy and numeracy skills. It's up to educators to figure out what works for each student, not merely to separate the wheat from the chaff and send the wheat to university and show the chaff the door.

"The job of school is no longer to sift students into the smart, medium and dumb groups," says Cooper.

"We've seen a sea change in high school culture," says Denise Andre, a superintendent at the Ottawa Catholic School Board. "We have all these different safety nets."

For Roxy Khan, 19, one of those safety nets is a high school classroom on the campus of Algonquin College.

Khan, who is finishing her last three credits, has been a student at two high schools and gave alternate school a shot twice, but didn't stay. She never really got on track until she went to the Catholic board's achievement centre at Algonquin.

"I always had teachers who have all these trick questions. I was like they were trying to trip me up rather than help me learn," she says.

When it comes to second chances and accommodating students, "school is the flight simulator, not the airplane," says Cooper. Pop quizzes, surprise tests and teachers who don't tell students what they want create competition instead of setting up standards everyone can understand.

At the end of each semester, the teachers of students who have failed courses submit a report and make recommendations, says Cousineau. Summer school is an option for some. So is repeating the entire course, especially for those students who need university-level prerequisites. The students who are candidates for credit recovery have usually acquired at least a third of the knowledge they need and have demonstrated the motivation to get it done.

Credits awarded through credit recovery represent only a minority of all credits. Last year, for example, about 38 Woodroffe students recovered credits while this year, it will likely be more than 100. Still, that's only a small proportion of the 6,500 to 7,000 credits that are attempted at Woodroffe every year, says Cousineau.

Shelly Quaid, 16, is recovering three credits in Wagland's classroom.

Quaid found classroom deadlines tight and was having difficulty absorbing some of the material. Her average has climbed by 30 per cent and credits study strategies she picked up in the program.

"I stopped procrastinating. I learned I have to do things anyway, so I might as well get them out of the way."

Classmate Philemon Osmers, 16, was ill for much of a semester and didn't get his science and history credits, mostly because he missed hours of homework every night.

Osmers was a reluctant recruit for credit recovery.

"Basically, they called me out of gym and called me into guidance and forced me in here," says Osmer, who plans never to return to credit recovery after he finishes. "I wasn't too happy at first. I like gym."

Wagland was also skeptical at first, but she was soon sold on it. Credit recovery allows students who need just a few more weeks to finish their credit without having to do it all over again and lets them graduate with their peers -- a big motivator for many students.

Besides, credit recovery isn't a free pass, she insists. Giving a zero to a student who fails to take a test or do an assignment is the easy way out.

"We're making them do the work," she says. "Giving zeroes is what kids want. Making them do it is a punishment."

At Notre Dame High School, Rhonda-Lee Simmonds, 18, recovered four credits over two semesters at Notre Dame High School while taking three regular credits.

She admits to "messing up" at her previous school. The four missing credits seemed an insurmountable hurdle to graduation, and if she couldn't graduate this year "I felt like just walking away."

But Simmonds wanted to set an example for her younger sister and become the first person in her family of 10 to graduate. She stuck with it, in part because she could take two co-op credits working in a kindergarten. Now she plans to study early childhood education.

The more classes a student fails at the Grade 9 level, the greater the chances the student won't graduate from high school, for example. School boards and schools track their data to make sure the actions they take produce results.

Schools aren't "letting" students pass. They're refusing to allow them to fail, say students.

"It's virtually impossible to fail here. If you put in the effort, there are so many people to help you," says All Saints student Erika Hodge, 17.