

# The Little Edgenuity That Could

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Once upon a time, course grades in middle school (formerly known as junior high school), for the most part, were not entirely required when it was time for a student to move on to high school. Terms like social promotion became prevalent while students entered high school with a clean slate setting their aim at attaining the necessary credits for the big day... graduation. In today's environment of acceleration and accountability, largely driven by state standards and testing, the middle school grade level (sixth-eighth) has become a juncture for monitoring points (similar to credits but based on quality points associated with respective

letter grades per quarter) for retention or promotion. Jane David of California summarizes the history of retention pros and cons the best by finding in research that early on (1975), studies showed that those promoted had advantages like better personal adjustment and positive attitudes than those retained. Fast-forward nearly 2 decades, and researchers found no significant differences between the two. Then, citing work from 2006 and 2007 where retention was now being tied to specific academic levels as dictated by state standardized testing, there was an increase in special education placement and no sign of advantage for the student that was retained when compared to nonretained students several years later (David, 2008). As such, where cons are now outweighing the pros, retention is becoming a last-ditch effort, hence the need for a viable path that students can access to begin credit retrieval for a core course before the end of the school year.



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## THE WHY

The clamor around current hot topic phrases such as *equity through the standards* or *equal access for all* could not be more accurate when considering the statistics linked to exceptional student education (ESE) services. According to the National Center for Education Statics, as recently as SY15, only 69% of students with disabilities graduated with a regular diploma, while 18% dropped out (McFarland, 2018). During the same period, specific sub-

groups of ESE, such as emotional behavioral disabled (EBD) students, accounted for 35% of those exiting education (McFarland 2018). Although EBD students make up a small fraction of many school populations across the United States, the data indicates that this population is not being provided equity or equal access. Nationally, an average of 40% of EBD students graduate from high school compared to 76% of general education students completing the same requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Moreover, considering both percentages, finding a solution for 100% graduation rates for all students across the nation is essential. One specific way that K–12 districts are hoping to reduce that gap while increasing graduation rates is using credit retrieval labs that incorporate an online program within a quasi-blended learning environment. In Volusia County Schools, that program of choice is Edgenuity. In fact, it is used in a couple of ways: one, as just described, and two, as core instruction for ESE students in the EBD classroom.

## THE WHAT

Edgenuity was initially founded as Education 2020 in 1998. It launched a web-based program in 2005 and claimed to have served over one million students by 2009. The company was rebranded in 2015 as Edgenuity. It then pressed forward to other milestones by serving more than 2 million students in 2015 and greater than 4 million in 2019. Edgenuity is a company that markets itself as an educational partner comprised of superb professionals interested in research, design, and results. Considering the plethora of independent studies conducted by Edgenuity, which are primarily focused on its efficacy, one can conclude that it is dedicated to transparent data sharing while improving the outcome for the students they serve. Programs they offer are as follows: core curriculum, credit recovery, intervention, test readiness,

virtual learning, personalized learning, summer school, and exceptional learners.

## THE HOW

As mentioned previously, in Volusia County, the Edgenuity program is used in two different, but somewhat the same, ways to serve specific students in need: credit retrieval labs and the ESE EBD classrooms, both under the guise of being a quasi-blended learning environment. I use *quasi-blended* because, at times, the teacher in the classroom plays the role of a manager of the learning while providing segments of tutoring in conjunction with guidance from another teacher off-site.

## CREDIT RETRIEVAL LABS

Typically, all VCS middle schools are funded with at least a half teaching unit for the credit retrieval lab. The teacher placed in this lab ideally holds certification for all core subjects (literacy, math, science, and social studies). This requirement is a particular need that is hard to fill as most teachers do not hold all of the certifications. It has become rarer since Florida discontinued the middle grades integrated certification (which was a one size fits all type certification) in October of 2011. At any rate, when a student is falling behind in progression with any of those core classes, they are placed in the credit retrieval lab to begin remediating the respective quarter that they failed. For example, in eighth grade, John Doe has received an *F* for the first and second grading periods of his science class. The administrative team, including the guidance counselor and core teachers, notify the parent of a schedule change. In this case, for the third grading period, John will be removed from his elective class (usually physical education) and put into the credit retrieval lab. Now, while continuing to be in the science classroom getting the current curriculum, he will be in the lab working on Edgenuity for the

curriculum content of the first two grading periods at some other time of day, depending on his schedule. John will not be alone. While in this credit retrieval lab, the teacher will assist, guide, motivate, instruct, remediate, and communicate with all parties with progress monitoring. Once he completes the requirements, and with the original teacher of record approval, John's schedule will be reverted to its original state. He can return to PE, having recovered the quality points for science.

The credit retrieval lab is also used for summer school purposes. Fortunately, there are no electives to consider, and the student can focus on multiple core courses (if need be) throughout the day. A bonus, being a web-based program, Edgenuity is accessible anytime and anywhere for most of the course content. The caveat is that summative assessments must be done while under the instructor's supervision in the classroom.

### **ESE EBD CLASSROOMS**

Interestingly, when looking at the ESE EBD classroom specifically, students are placed in the Edgenuity platform not necessarily for credit retrieval but for initial instruction for those core courses that the student's assigned teacher is not certified. The teacher of record for the student is now a third-party teacher who is managing the program virtually from the district online learning center (Volusia Virtual). For example, John Doe is an ESE EBD student in the seventh grade. His teacher holds a certification in ESE K-12 and math 6-12. Depending on the ESE master schedule and access to other certified ESE teachers in the EBD department, John will be placed in Edgenuity for core instruction in all subjects except math. John's teacher will provide direct instruction for math at some point in his schedule for the day, and then he will engage with Edgenuity for the other curriculum. While working through the Edgenuity content, John will receive

support in brick and mortar from his assigned teacher, while the Volusia Virtual teacher manages the course content online. Ideally, an iron-clad communication channel exists between the classroom teacher and the online manager to ensure student success by removing potential barriers the student may encounter. Again, a quasi-blended learning environment is the best term that I have been able to land on that describes this relationship.

### **THE BARRIERS**

Research has shown that the online environment is not suited for everyone because of the learner's level of autonomy. However, this is the option for credit retrieval and ESE EBD students in Volusia County and I would guess others too. In a quasi-blended learning environment, teachers physically support students in the classroom while another teacher manages the online content virtually from a remote location. With this and considering that high collective teacher efficacy can have a tremendous impact on a student's yearly growth, it is worthy to wonder what the efficacies amongst the students and teachers in this quasi-blended environment. What is the student's perception of the teacher's presence in the learning? What is the self-efficacy of the student/teacher in the quasi-blended environment? One could pose that if collective student/teacher efficacy increases in the quasi-blended environment, then student performance will increase as evidenced by more excellent graduation rates, lower drop-out rates, and increased teacher retention.

The notion of efficacy began with the work of Albert Bandura. He described it [efficacy] as one's belief to organize and execute thoughts into actions that would result favorably with the individual's intent (Silverman & Davis 2009). This thought overlaid into teachers' realm when Patricia Ashton presented efficacy as

two dimensions, the first being general, the extent to which teachers believe students can learn. In contrast, the second is personal, the extent to which the teacher believes students can learn from the teacher themselves (Silverman & Davis 2009). Efficacy itself, though, is a moving target because everyone is on a learning continuum. If efficacy is not innate and can be learned, then one's position on the continuum of learning will vary with the input from their environment. For example, a rookie teacher's self-efficacy is likely to be much lower than a veteran teacher, especially if the rookie teacher is coming into a new profession without any intern experience. With that, perhaps self-efficacy can be related to terms such as self-esteem. Good self-esteem often leads to viable outcomes and results, which in turn supports the teacher during any time of challenge where elements of resiliency are needed. However, in retrospect, what happens to a veteran teacher's self-efficacy who is given a new assignment or transfers to a new school/district? Certainly, in this case, the veteran swings on their pendulum to the other end of the continuum in their learning and battles with less efficacy, that is, unless there is support in the new environment. This support, if infused across the school as a collective belief, results in what John Hattie calls a significant potential for student achievement. And what is good for the student is good for the teacher.

John Hattie has pinpointed specific evidence across thousands of research data while doing a meta-analysis that such collective efficacy can translate to an effect size ratio of 1.57. That is more than three times one year's worth of growth. Since this is such a significant number to consider, we must explore vehicles to support self and collective efficacy, especially when putting some of our students with the greatest needs in an environment that might not be the best fit for them.

## BREAKING THE BARRIER

Teacher self-efficacy has many variables to consider. Ultimately it is their confidence level in believing they can teach and that students will learn. Being able to isolate the variables affecting teacher self-efficacy can be difficult. It is one's perception of reality. As instructional leaders, we must find ways to support the learning of our teachers so that they reciprocate that learning and positive self-efficacy to the students in the classroom. This behavior will ultimately support a positive, collective efficacy where all stakeholders move to the same goal of achievement/success level. However, more needs to be explored to understand how this translates into the quasi-blended learning environment described herein.

Instructional technology can be a source of reducing self-efficacy (depending on the individual's perception), while in many cases, being sought as the solution for increasing self-efficacy. In the end, it is about the purposeful planning and implementation of the tools needed in a 21st century classroom. At the professional/applied level, evidence indicates that long-term, job-embedded learning experiences based on vetted templates for professional learning design have demonstrated great success.

Certainly, professional learning is needed at the applied level for *catching people up while keeping up*. This research also reveals the need for university curriculums to improve their programs to utilize instructional/educational technology. Each level of our educational system plays a role in improving outcomes and cannot assume it is being taken care of by another level along the journey.

## IS EDGENUITY WORKING?

Before using Edgenuity, local history has shown a struggle with graduation rates since the onset of standardized testing. Edgenuity is relatively new to Volusia

county in the way it is being used. The VCS website reports that the graduation rate for the 2018–2019 school year increased 5.8%, and its 84.5% graduation rate is the highest it has ever been, encompassing a total increase of 12.9% since the 2014–15 school year (VCS, 2019). This data is not directly tied to, and the success cannot be solely pinpointed to the use of Edgenuity because, in the grand scheme of things, it is a small subsystem of a much larger system. Nor is it implied to be a specific data point to flaunt the use of Edgenuity. However, this small piece is a part of the entangled web of the equational continuum we know as the graduation journey and is worth mentioning. Despite real barriers and challenges to conquer while getting better at what we do, certainly, there are many factors to be considered as the reason for these results, much of which, I would bet on, resides within the human factor driven by amazing teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and the students themselves who are adapting, increasing their self-efficacy, and positively impacting the collective efficacy in their respective environments.

### COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE

During the recent event of the COVID-19 pandemic (which we are still currently in at the time of this writing), all schools in Florida were mandated to use distance learning. In Volusia County, all secondary instruction is being accomplished via Edgenuity. The classroom teachers are

monitoring and providing support along the way. It is an interesting time to observe and note how we come out on the other end of this. Certainly, the number of users has increased exponentially, and I am curious to know how self-efficacy perceptions play a role in the success or struggle our students are experiencing. To be continued.

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