MassGrad Evaluation Briefs
MassGrad Coalitions

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Introduction

The MassGrad Evaluation Briefs share findings from the evaluation of programs funded by the MassGrad initiative, whose purpose is “to substantially increase the number of students who earn a high school diploma.” The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) believes that the lessons learned from MassGrad can help all schools that are trying to increase graduation rates, so ESE asked the evaluator—the UMass Donahue Institute—to frame the briefs not just for MassGrad participants, but also for a broader audience.

In the spring of 2012, ESE awarded MassGrad funding to four proposed coalitions from around the state: Franklin County, Malden, New Bedford, and Worcester. The coalitions are each focusing on a self-identified area of challenge related to dropout prevention that can best be solved through a collaborative approach. Each coalition’s members are representatives from districts, schools, community-based organizations, local businesses, and in the case of one coalition, local government. Technical assistance provided by the School & Main Institute supports the work of each coalition as they focus on issues that relate to dropout prevention and increasing graduation rates in their community.

This is the first Evaluation Brief focused on the MassGrad Coalitions. It provides a summary of the work and site-specific successes of each coalition during its first year, as well as a summary of the coalitions’ shared successes and challenges.

The Franklin County Coalition

The Franklin County Coalition intends to develop a cross-district system for assessing and tracking youth needs, goals, referrals, and interventions, in order to reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates for transfer students across the county. The purpose of this multi-district system is to improve each district’s ability to address the challenges associated with student mobility within the county, because the coalition reports that this accounts for 30–40% of the county’s transfer students.

Activities. As of spring 2013, The Franklin County Coalition had engaged in three main activities. First, the coalition reviewed research regarding student indicators relevant to the coalition’s goals, and then asked each member agency or district to collect and share data related to indicators selected based on that research. Second, the coalition developed and administered parent and student surveys focused on gaining information related to student mobility and dropout risk. Finally, the coalition conducted individual interviews with 40 dropouts from Franklin County to learn more about the challenges these students had faced and their reasons for dropping out. The coalition is in the process of analyzing the results of the dropout interviews and plans to disseminate the findings to member districts. It is also in the process of developing a cross-district protocol for handling intra-county transfer students.

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Successes. Coalition representatives believe that the coalition has increased the amount of networking across the four member districts, resulting in increased sharing of best practices for working with transfer students. The coalition has also shared findings from the parent and student surveys with member districts. While they had not yet analyzed the 40 interviews with dropouts at the time of an interview with the evaluator in the spring of 2013, they considered conducting the interviews to be an important accomplishment.

The Malden Coalition

The Malden Coalition, entitled “Malden’s Promise,” focuses on addressing how youth development and the conditions of poverty impact high school dropouts in the city. The coalition proposed three main components: (1) opportunities for coalition members and others (such as staff from the schools and community-based organizations working directly with youth) to participate in professional development regarding poverty and youth development; (2) a process for utilizing the public schools’ student information portal to develop a web-based information sharing mechanism that schools and agencies will be able to use as a collaborative case-management system; and (3) a mobile phone application that will allow students, parents, and coalition partners to search for assistance and events in the community. After a discussion of each member’s goals for the coalition and reviewing the findings from a Malden youth risk survey, Malden’s Promise decided to narrow its focus to two issues: student mental health and the dropout prevention strategy of having adult advocates for student support within the schools.

Activities. In the spring of 2013, Malden’s Promise was in the process of developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with its partner organizations regarding their intended contributions. The coalition’s idea of developing a mobile application had transitioned to a plan to develop a similarly focused website, which they believed would be accessible to and reach a larger population. Work on the website was progressing, with graduate students populating a database with relevant services and resources. Much of the coalition’s effort during the spring was focused on the launch of the city-wide “Graduation Guru” program, which included developing content for training adult advocates, followed by recruiting and training advocates, and finally recruiting students whom the “gurus” would support.

Successes. Malden’s Promise is led by three individuals who represent the school district, the mayor’s office, and a community-based organization. According to coalition representatives, the leaders’ insights and connections have enabled Malden’s Promise to get stakeholders involved from many parts of the community. The coalition also implemented a multi-media campaign. Representatives noted that the coalition’s strength lies in the diversity of its approximately 40 members.

An additional success is the use of small-group breakout sessions during the coalition’s monthly meetings. Breakout sessions have helped members to specify and delegate tasks associated with each of the coalition’s goals and to carry out some brief tasks. Completing tasks during the meetings has reduced the time commitment required outside of meetings for coalition members.

The New Bedford Coalition

The New Bedford Coalition’s proposal set out that the school district, in collaboration with several community partners, would launch the “Future Ready Family Coalition” (FRFC) to guide the development of the New Bedford High School’s newly established College and Career Readiness Family Engagement Center. The Family Engagement Center focuses on creating a culturally responsive and multi-lingual environment that will enable at-risk and language minority students and their families to engage in discussions and gain access to resources related to college readiness and enrollment. The coalition proposed to strengthen the Center’s ability to support these students and their families by leveraging the
resources of various community-based organizations. Both the coalition and the Family Engagement Center were launched in the fall of 2012.

**Activities.** As of the spring of 2013, coalition members had developed and were about to launch a set of professional development workshops for teachers, focused on cultural competency. The coalition was also in the process of identifying additional topics for professional development workshops. The coalition planned to continue supporting efforts to increase family engagement in the Center through various communication strategies, such as using currently involved parents and families to spread the word to others who could benefit. The coalition was also working with the Center to begin the planning of a day-long community-wide event focused on college readiness and enrollment that would take place in the fall of 2013.

**Successes.** Representatives reported that the greatest success of the FRFC has been its ability to bring school- and community-based individuals together to serve at-risk and language minority students in New Bedford High School. The coalition believes that community members have gained a feeling of being part of the high school and that there is broader acceptance of immigrant and language minority families in the community. This success has apparently resulted in part from the coalition’s efforts to encourage community partners to hold events at the Center, which is located in the high school. Additionally, the Immigrants’ Assistance Center, a local non-profit organization, is providing translation and other language support services to the Center. Having these resources and events physically located at the Center is increasing awareness of the Center’s existence beyond the school building.

**The Worcester Coalition**

The Worcester Coalition is focused on reducing the dropout rate of Hispanic and English language learner (ELL) students. In its proposal, Worcester planned to develop and implement a student case management system in two of the city’s seven high schools: North High School and South High Community School.

**Activities.** The coalition focused its efforts on North High School during the 2012–13 school year. The coalition identified and provided support to 15–20 ELL students. District representatives and North High School teachers met bi-weekly to discuss the students’ progress and ongoing needs. The coalition also hosted a meeting for the students and their parents that focused on college readiness and enrollment. In addition to working directly with students, the coalition utilized posters and discussions with content-area teachers to increase awareness of the high incidence of Hispanic and ELL dropouts at North High School. The coalition planned to continue supporting students at North High School while expanding the program to South High Community School in the fall of 2013.

**Successes.** Representatives reported that the coalition successfully worked with North High School teachers to identify and support the identified students during the school year. They also report that the college-focused family meeting was well attended. Finally, coalition members believed that their dropout awareness campaign has been successful, as one representative noted that content-area teachers have contacted school-based coalition members with concerns related to their at-risk ELL students.

**Cross-Coalition Successes and Challenges**

**Member networking and broader awareness of community resources.** An early success of all four coalitions has been the connections that members have made and are continuing to make across the community. Representatives from all coalitions shared that members have gained knowledge of community resources and services that has improved their ability to refer youth to appropriate people and organizations. One representative said, “Getting to know other people at other organizations is a huge benefit. I find out about organizations I didn’t even know about before being involved in [the coalition]. Every single person who shows up at the meeting has some value to add.... It is a great connection.”
Transitioning members from consultation to action. Managers from all four coalitions said that most members’ default position has been to serve as external advisors, and that it has been difficult to empower them to become full partners who are responsible for completing specific coalition tasks. For some coalitions, a reported challenge related to this transition was that the members are volunteers but the coalition managers are paid, leading some members to believe that the coalition’s work was primarily the manager’s responsibility. Other managers reported that the coalition’s work falls outside of members’ “already long list of professional responsibilities.” However, representatives acknowledged that members have joined the coalitions because of personal or professional interest in the coalitions’ missions, and that therefore they had the ability and willingness to contribute.

A helpful process for making the shift from consultation to action has been the use of asset mapping. Representatives noted that, initially, they did not have enough information about the assets and abilities of their members, nor had they established an explicit list of tasks associated with coalition work. Once they had devised a list of tasks and engaged in an asset mapping activity with their members, the members were better positioned to transition from being advisors to actors. Another helpful process reported by one coalition, as discussed above, was the inclusion of small-group breakout sessions during the monthly meetings. The breakout sessions have enabled members to engage in task-specific work, thereby reducing the time commitment outside of meetings.