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For inquiries about the evaluation, please contact Abigail Egan at the UMass Donahue Institute: AEgan@donahue.umassp.edu, (774) 455-7380

MassGrad Evaluation Briefs – Implementation Awards
Focus: Positive School Climate and Socio-emotional Systems of Support

Introduction

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

Background of the Implementation Awards

The Implementation awards are MassGrad’s largest program, awarded to 28 schools in 17 districts for 3–5 years to implement dropout prevention, intervention, and re-engagement programs. Each school could select from up to three out of seven designated strategies, and an extensive range of designs resulted. The seven strategies included:

1. Alternative pathways to meet a range of student needs;
2. Adult advocates for student support;
3. Positive school climate and socio-emotional systems of support;
4. Service learning and work-based learning models;
5. Credit recovery, credit acceleration, and distance learning expansion;
6. Expansion of the school year and summer transition programs; and
7. Programs for transient students.

The evaluation is assessing program processes and outcomes both quantitatively (such as comparing graduation rates of MassGrad and non-MassGrad students) and qualitatively (such as reporting knowledge shared by program personnel). The findings reported here are mostly qualitative.

Positive School Climate – Overview and Models

Schools implementing the Positive School Climate strategy are receiving support to implement programs that help students at risk of dropping out to identify, understand, and regulate their emotions and interactions with peers and adults. These skills are intended to mitigate problematic behavior by teaching students how to interact and communicate positively. Programs that address external social factors, such as family concerns or substance abuse issues, were also included in this category.

This section is based on visits to seven awardee schools in six districts during the 2012–13 school year that are implementing the Positive School Climate strategy for dropout prevention with support from their MassGrad Implementation award.

The three models for this Implementation strategy identified by the evaluation are:

1. Increased counseling and support services staff. Some schools added one or more counselors dedicated to providing services to high-need students. These staff members provide increased capacity to manage caseloads, provide services and supports, and coordinate services. In addition, one school added a
new staff member dedicated to monitoring and serving students identified as being at risk of dropping out. This staff member is responsible for coordinating socio-emotional support services, monitoring student risk factors, connecting students to appropriate internal and external support services, building partnerships, and providing limited group counseling services.

2. **Partnerships with community-based organizations.** Several sites are working with community-based organizations to bring outside support services to students in schools. In addition, one school is working with a community-based organization to create an off-site alternative education setting that strives to provide students with a comprehensive and highly personalized system of supports (e.g., social, emotional, physical, academic, and legal).

3. **Enrichment activities.** One school added a new staff member to coordinate a program that facilitates a broad range of enrichment activities for students. This model is being implemented in a non-traditional setting, and the program offers enrichment activities during an “advisory” period that include art, basketball, civics, dance, gaming, gardening, homework club, leadership team, movie club, stage arts, and step squad. The enrichment activities are intended to support student learning and cognitive development in creative ways; to broaden the mindset of the students; and to provide opportunities for physical, academic and socio-emotional growth.

All three models serve students considered to be at high risk of dropping out. Program staff in Models 1 and 2 provide counseling; serve as liaisons between students and other support services; coordinate student services; and facilitate connections among students, families, teachers, and administrators. The enrichment activities model (Model 3) is distinct from the other models, because the purpose is to improve the general well-being of a relatively large group of at-risk students, rather than to address the needs of individual students.

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**Common Program Features**

Some of the common elements across sites implementing the Positive School Climate strategy include:

1. Hiring counseling staff who:
   a. Provide individual counseling and case management support, with a caseload of 12–30 students;
   b. Lead group counseling sessions that focus on topics such as substance abuse, anger management, anxiety, bereavement, pregnancy, and parenting;
   c. Attend regular meetings with academic and/or behavioral support teams;
   d. Manage crisis interventions;
   e. Check in with students frequently; and
   f. Sustain supportive and therapeutic relationships with students.

2. Facilitating orientation activities for freshmen, new students, and programs. Organizing student advisory groups (e.g., facilitating weekly meetings).

3. Building relationships and connections among staff, students, community members and groups, and the student support services they provide.

4. Providing staff with professional development on topics such as counseling, restorative justice practices, and student behavior management.

5. Collaborating with community partners (e.g., community-based organizations, social service agencies).

6. Offering continued support, such as weekly or monthly check-ins, to students who have transitioned out of a support program.

7. Combining academic and socio-emotional supports in order to “serve the whole child.”

8. Building school-family relationships, such as by hosting monthly meetings and activities with parents and guardians.
Best Practices

Suggested best practices from interviews with Positive School Climate sites include:

**Increase the number of adults working with students.** Several sites attempted to decrease the student-to-adult ratio for all students within a school or alternative education setting. These sites believe that this is a key element in providing a positive, supportive environment for at-risk youth, because it permits staff to be more responsive to student needs and to develop deeper relationships with students. The lowest student-to-adult ratio reported by a Positive School Climate program was about 4:1.

**Create a safe space.** Several sites attempted to create a space where students can go to find relief from school pressures, receive support if they are having a difficult day or are in crisis, and work with a core set of teachers and counselors with whom they have enduring and comfortable relationships. Most sites reported that their program has a separate space in the school building for this purpose.

**Develop a supportive classroom environment.** Several sites worked to establish supportive classroom environments. Classroom staff received professional development on this topic, and these sites hold daily, weekly, or bi-weekly team meetings to discuss concerns and monitor student needs. Teachers communicate with parents and guardians frequently via phone calls, emails, and text messages, as well as inviting them to monthly parent dinners. Teachers at some sites also provide students with forums for sharing their ideas and airing their concerns with other students and staff.

**Provide transitional and continuing supports.** Several programs have designed transitional supports for students who are ending their participation in a support group, activity, or program. These programs monitor the progress of former participants by speaking with their teachers, checking their grades and attendance, and speaking frequently with the students themselves about their progress and concerns. The programs also provide opportunities such as family nights and open program activities that enable former participants to stay connected.

**Provide acute-level supports.** Some sites make staff available to address acute student issues and concerns, such as a drug relapse or family trauma. Some interviewees said that this degree of support was an important part of establishing caring, trusting relationships with students.

**Build partnerships with outside support agencies.** Staff at several sites are working to establish and/or maintain partnerships with outside organizations that can provide students with physical and mental health services that are not available at the school.

**Facilitate access to social services.** A few sites reported that they are providing services and resources that are beyond a school’s traditional role. These include helping students and their families obtain support related to childcare, immigrant issues, food stamps, housing, benefits, peer conflict resolution, and family mediation.

**Ask older students to serve as mentors.** Some sites ask students who have previously participated in their programs to help with program orientation and to serve as mentors for current program students or during small-group discussion sessions.

**Integrate data and service management.** Sites noted that increased staffing had improved critical data management processes and had consequently improved service coordination. Improvements in data management and service coordination mentioned by sites included:

- Rapid progress in identifying and connecting with at-risk students.
- Developing a common definition of what it means to be at risk (e.g., increased likelihood of dropout).
- Increased awareness of services available to students.
- Improvements in framing, tracking, and coordinating services.
- Regular monitoring and updating of a list of at-risk students.
## Cross-Site Program Issues

Three program issues that were important in multiple sites are described below.

**Student need.** All sites reported that demand for support services exceeded supply. They described myriad challenges affecting students’ physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being. These included serious mental health issues, substance abuse and addiction, low motivation, homelessness, disabilities and other special needs, academic problems, chronic truancy, gang involvement, pregnancy, and parenting. In addition, some interviewees reported that their Positive School Climate strategies were less effective with the most behaviorally challenged students.

**Connecting with students.** Many sites reported that building strong relationships with students was essential but required a consistent investment of time and effort. These programs did not assume that caring, trusting relationships are a natural byproduct of a high-quality academic program. Some interviewees said that building these relationships was an important first step in identifying each student’s specific needs and connecting them with appropriate support services. Sites utilized a mix of informal relationship-building and formal individual and group counseling to develop trust and rapport.

**Communication.** Several sites said that managing communication among students, counselors, school administrators, and other partners was challenging. They had worked on improving communication and coordination with internal and external partners, such as formalizing protocols to ensure that students were receiving appropriate supports and taking steps to foster a mutual sense of trust and respect.

## Conclusion

A variety of approaches to promoting positive school climate and socio-emotional supports are available. These include models that provide counseling and case management, enrichment activities, and connections with community-based organizations. Best practices include building relationships, reducing student-to-adult ratios, creating supportive environments, and facilitating access to internal and external resources. Key issues for schools attempting to implement Positive School Climate programs include deciding which students to target with limited resources, managing student data, and communicating and coordinating services with all members of a student’s support team.