MassGrad Evaluation Briefs – Implementation Awards
Focus: Adult Advocates for Student Support

Introduction

The MassGrad Evaluation Briefs were originally written for participants in the 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 update this introduction to frame the briefs 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 3-4 years to implement dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery 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 early findings reported here are mostly qualitative.

Adult Advocates for Student Support

The Adult Advocates for Student Support strategy is being utilized by 12 schools that received MassGrad “Implementation” awards, and the many variations in their approaches provide ample opportunities for sharing best practices and lessons learned. Some programs can already point to concrete, positive outcomes of this work — some quantifiable, and others based on qualitative observations. Conclusions are drawn primarily from interviews and observations conducted during the evaluator’s site visits, but each site’s funding proposals and periodic progress reports were also used.

Programs have reported that the models they developed are helping to keep students engaged in high school and on track to graduate. Although many best practices have been identified, there are also obstacles and challenges to the adult advocates work. This evaluation brief will attempt to highlight some of the relevant issues identified so far.
Program Models

In its award materials, ESE describes the “Adult Advocates for Student Support” strategy as “two types of counseling/professional staff to support positive student outcomes through support prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts at the local level: 1) graduation/readiness coaches and 2) reengagement/recovery coaches. These staff and associated programming assist students in meeting personal and academic needs through a meaningful and sustained personal relationship with a trained adult.” Both types of adult advocates mentioned in this definition are being utilized in awardee schools, and they have the following wide range of titles, job descriptions, caseloads, and professional backgrounds:

1. Graduation & Prevention Coaches (full-time to 20 hrs/wk) – These coaches have a caseload of 30 to 90 9th- and 12th-grade students, depending on the school. The full-time coaches have backgrounds in social work, school adjustment counseling, and administration.

2. Advocate Case Workers (19 hrs/wk) & Teacher Advocates (2 hrs/wk) – One school has two types of advocates. The part-time case workers each work intensively with 15 at-risk students. The teacher advocates, who can be any staff member (e.g., teacher, custodian, librarian), provide in-school support to 3-4 students through advocacy, tutoring, and counseling.

3. Graduation Coach Coordinator (6 hrs/wk) & Teacher/Staff Graduation Coaches (6 hrs/wk) – Multiple schools are using a model that utilizes teachers and other school personnel as graduation coaches who each work with 6 to 25 students across grades. In most cases there is also a coordinator, who assigns students to coaches and monitors the work being done.

4. Retention Intervention Specialist (part-time) – One school has a staff member who focuses in part on retaining students by making home visits and phone calls, as well as meeting with students either at school or off campus if they are absent.

5. Recovery Coaches (part-time) – One school has a graduation coach who also works to recover students who have left the school. The primary re-engagement strategy has been sending letters home, and when student and parents respond to the letter, the coach creates individualized plans for coursework completion for the returning students. Another school had similar plans but, due to high demand, has allocated their award resources to graduation coaches instead.

6. Community-Based Coaches (part-time) – Two districts are partnering with community centers that are utilizing graduation and recovery coaches. One of the community centers has a recovery team that conducts street outreach, looking for students in their home communities. Then the recovery team helps the center’s admissions staff determine whether a student is a good fit for the academic component of the center’s program, and encourages the students to pursue their diploma. The other community center provides graduation coaches to the students it serves. In addition, one high school enlisted community-based coaches in mid-year in order to reduce the case-loads of school staff members, and also because they thought community coaches might be more effective for students who were having difficulty “connecting in the school building.” One of the community coaches was a retired teacher from the district, and the others were tutors who were already working with students from the school.

Program Characteristics

All awardee schools assign adult advocates to those students who are deemed at highest risk of dropout, based on factors such as attendance, grades, credit accumulation, discipline problems, and motivation. With some variation across schools, the graduation coach role generally involves monitoring students and ensuring that they are receiving the support they need to graduate (for seniors) or to stay on track to graduate (for younger students).
Graduation coaches meet with students, set goals, put plans and services in place for them, call families, conduct home visits, and in some cases try to recover students who have left the school. The graduation coaches at one school complete goal-setting worksheets with each of their students, a process that reviews grades, credits, course requirements, MCAS scores, and attendance. The process has been so successful that the principal has expanded it to include all students and the guidance department.

One school held monthly events for all students who work with graduation coaches. The events are one to two hours long. Half of the time is structured (e.g., guest speakers, stress management workshops), and half of the time is unstructured, so students can socialize with their peers and work with their coaches.

Some adult advocates support summer transition programs and freshman seminars that highlight important issues related to successful high school completion and the differences between middle school and high school. One graduation coach explained,

In the middle school they can fail two courses and still be promoted, whereas when they get to high school it becomes a credit issue. So we need to do a better job with orientation and transition, to help them develop a different mentality when they come to high school. A lot of these kids, if they fail one course they think 'no big deal', but then they are five credits behind and they don’t make that connection until they realize, ‘Oh my goodness, I am not a sophomore now!’ They need to understand that you become a sophomore when you get your 40 credits and so forth up the line.

For some schools, the role of the graduation coach is to connect students to services inside and outside of the school. Others help students who are leaving the school to find GED programs or community programs such as Job Corps that will enable students to continue their education. One graduation coach described himself as the “gatekeeper” for leaving the school, meaning that he had to connect and consult with all students who were expressing interest in dropping out.

Training emerged as an important aspect of adult advocate programs, as many adult advocates needed skills that are typically expected from guidance personnel. They also needed clarity about their expected roles. Some adult advocates reported that they had participated in valuable training at the start of the year and ongoing professional development throughout the year. Other advocates reported that they had received minimal training.

Successes

The majority of adult advocates said that they believe they are helping some students graduate or make progress toward graduation. Most talked about the importance of adults building individualized relationships with students, explaining that these trusting relationships increase student accountability and success in school. One adult advocate explained, “it is important that students have adults at the school who care about them, that they have a sense that they are visible and have advocates in the building, and that they feel comfortable enough to come in and stay.” Another teacher said, “It is important for students to know that somebody is genuinely interested in how they are doing in school. That helps them know that they have a place here, and from that place they can continue on to success.” (This finding about the importance of relationships for dropout prevention was echoed by school personnel across all of the Implementation award strategies.)

A clear success is that many adult advocates have become embedded with other dropout prevention work in their school, district, and/or community. For example, one school reported that credit recovery has “taken off” at their school because the graduation coaches are referring the students they work with to the credit recovery program. Another graduation coach explained, “the job is to follow the at-risk students and
implement different programs within the whole school to increase the graduation rates. You can’t just work with your group. You have to work with the rest of the staff too, so we can work systemically and make change.” Another school discussed the role of the graduation coach as simultaneously creating connections to students, school personnel, and diverse community members and resources. Finally, one school reported that efforts to identify at-risk students for extra supports were piecemeal in the past, but that the MassGrad funds have enabled them to be more systematic and intentional.

One of the most important successes reported across schools is that adult advocates are helping to keep students in school and increase graduation rates. One of the community centers using graduation coaches reported that they have successfully intervened in keeping 50 students in school this year. A recovery coach from another school reported that the program has re-engaged seven students, and that five of them are now on track to graduate. A common theme across interviews was that students like having graduation coaches, and that the schools wish they could provide a coach for every student.

### Challenges

Adult advocate programs faced challenges as well. Some said that the work was too time-consuming, and that advocates needed smaller caseloads. The number of students that interviewees felt was a manageable caseload varied across schools, from about two to six students. This also varied with the different scope of the adult advocate role in different programs. Some schools that utilized teachers as adult advocates reported that it is difficult for teachers to balance their adult advocate work with their other responsibilities during planning periods and after school. In one district, graduation coach teachers were only allowed to work with their assigned students before and after school.

The majority of interviewees emphasized that student attendance is an ongoing challenge, because coaches can’t work with or be effective with students who are not in school. Several adult advocates expressed frustration at not being able to reach and engage the students who do not come to school even after a coach calls and/or visits their homes.

### Conclusions

A range of adult advocate models have been developed by MassGrad Implementation awardee schools, and the lessons learned from early implementation are a potential source of mutual support and improvement. Adult advocates appear to have broad appeal among students and school personnel, and initial reports suggest that supports provided by adult advocates have contributed to students graduating and staying on track to graduate. The impact of adult advocates on student dropout prevention and recovery will be further investigated quantitatively during the course of the MassGrad evaluation.