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.

Background of the MassGrad 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.

Alternative Pathways – Overview and Models

In its MassGrad Implementation award materials, ESE describes the Alternative Pathways strategy as the development of new programs or schools that create smaller, more tailored environments to address the specific needs of certain populations of students and provide alternative pathways to a high school diploma. These programs or schools can run during the school day, after school, or at community-based organizations.

The Alternative Pathways strategy is being utilized by 18 Implementation awardee schools in 11 districts. Schools reported positive outcomes that included fewer disciplinary problems, increased student engagement and accountability, improved attendance, and positive student response to more personalized learning.
The Alternative Pathways programs fall into five categories – freshman programs, school-within-a-school models, career pathways, online courses developed internally, and alternative learning models – that are each described in this evaluation brief. Many programs continue to evolve based on program needs and experience, so in some cases the programs described below may have changed subsequent to data collection. The descriptions also make it clear that the seven Implementation award strategies overlap substantially; for example, many of the Alternative Pathways programs also include aspects of the Credit Recovery, Expanded Learning Time, and Socio-emotional Systems of Support strategies.

**Freshman programs.** These programs feature a team of teachers working with all freshmen or a subset of the most at-risk freshmen. Two of the four freshman programs serve all 9th-grade students, and two work only with 9th-grade students identified as at greatest risk of not graduating. Three schools use a team teaching model, in which a group of students has all of their teachers in common, and the teachers meet weekly to plan and share information about their students. Examples of innovative school and district practices in freshman programs are described below.

1. All incoming students in one school participate in a Foundation Seminar, which was established because of high attrition among new students that staff attributed to students lacking a sense of belonging in the school. The seminar consists of all new students taking core courses together with the same faculty during their first term. The students are also assigned faculty advisors from outside the seminar, so that they are more connected in the school once the seminar is over.

2. One school identifies 20 freshmen to be supported by a team of English, math, science, and special education teachers. The team uses common teaching practices across disciplines, including reading approaches, notebook organization, and grading policies. The teachers felt that using common practices, as well as knowing and communicating about the students as a team, increased student support, engagement, and accountability.

3. One district is implementing freshman transition seminars in three awardee schools, all using the Career Choices curriculum, but tailoring it to each school’s needs. At one of the schools, all 9th-grade students rotate through the school’s four academies and receive a portion of the curriculum that has been customized for that academy. One goal of this rotation is to enable the four teachers to build relationships with the freshmen and to be in a position to share knowledge about the students across the teaching team.

4. One district identifies 9th-grade students who are at high risk of not graduating, and offers them the option of attending an alternative high school for a year before joining the traditional high school. The program starts with a summer learning experience, after which the students take courses together as a cohort. The students have access to counselors, home visits, and social workers. The school reported that integration of these wraparound services has been a key to student success.

A success reported across these models was that students felt a greater motivation to fulfill academic expectations, which informants believed was due to the team teaching structure. They also reported that the freshman programs had improved school culture and led to improved attendance and fewer dropouts. Multiple informants noted the importance of collaborating with teachers and administrators from the sending middle schools to identify the most appropriate incoming students for the high school programs.

Scheduling was a challenge at all three schools implementing the freshman transition seminars. The greatest level of student exposure to the seminar appeared to take place at the school where the seminar was a regularly-scheduled class for all students. Another school transitioned from that type of scheduling to an after-school time during an extended school day and saw student participation drop sharply.
Schools-within-a-school (SWS). These are alternative programs located on the same campus as the main high school, but designed to operate with substantial independence from the school or district in which they are embedded. Three Implementation awardees created an SWS, targeting at-risk students. Some of their innovative practices include:

1. Smaller class sizes, community-building activities (e.g., school-wide meetings each morning), additional guidance resources, and after-school support.
2. Afternoon, evening, and online options for over-aged and under-credited students.
3. Common planning time for teachers.
4. Community-building activities, including frequent school-wide meetings and monthly family dinners cooked by the students.
5. Frequent parent meetings, and home visits as necessary.

The SWS programs have attempted to select students with similar levels of academic preparedness, which they report has facilitated the tailoring and success of their teaching. Their students also have above-average needs for socio-emotional support services. This has reportedly been a drain on one program that has less experienced staff, but has worked out well in a program with more experienced staff, because needed interventions can happen quickly and successfully. Another program addressed the challenge of teacher fatigue from working with students with high socio-emotional needs, by having teachers teach in the SWS for part of the day and in the associated high school for part of the day. One program also reported that their ability to be flexible – such as to allow students to have extended absences and return when ready – was successful in reducing dropout rates.

Additional reported challenges included recruiting teachers for evening programs, as well as union grievances regarding unequal planning time and class sizes. One SWS increased class sizes to address equity concerns, and another SWS is hiring staff whose regular hours will include evening hours, rather than stipending teachers who have already worked a full day. A third SWS is carefully documenting their impacts, in order to demonstrate that the separate school and smaller class sizes are not only improving outcomes for the SWS students, but are also improving the learning environment and academic outcomes for the students and teachers in the associated school. They are doing this by comparing current and historical rates of indicators such as disciplinary referrals and successful course completion, for both the SWS and the school from which the SWS students were drawn.

Career pathways. One awardee school set out to develop three career pathways, each associated with a separate career academy within the school. They subsequently transitioned to a less resource intensive model, however, due to high staff turnover, a change of leadership, and demands of the original model that exceeded the capacity of available school personnel. The updated model is still career-related, with students taking a career skills course and completing internships in the community. The unpaid but credit-bearing internships with public, private, and non-profit organizations were arranged by a team of teachers during the summer, using cold calling and their personal and professional networks. To the extent possible, students are matched to internships based on their interests. They are dismissed for the final two periods of each school day, but can complete their internship whenever works best for their internship site, with the basic model being 8 hours per week and a 200-hour internship. School personnel selected students who were on track to graduate but had a low GPA, because they had frequently observed students with these characteristics becoming disengaged during their senior year.

Strengths of the program have included interacting with adults in a real-world environment, which has helped students develop professional skills and increased levels of professionalism. The school reported that most students have been successful and have projected a positive image of the program. Challenges
have included monitoring students’ participation, preparing mentors to provide strong mentorship and utilize students fully, and finding students who are willing to commit to and follow through on the program’s requirements. Solutions have included instituting a weekly check-in with each student, as well as plans for additional mentor training in subsequent program years.

**Online courses developed internally.** Three awardee schools developed their own online courses, using the Moodle course management system, as an alternative pathway. These schools provide students the opportunity to take courses online, rather than in traditional classrooms, as described below.

1. Two awardee schools in one district utilize this approach. The first school uses online course content to support an after-school pathway. The second school developed competency-based modules for core subjects, which they offer to students who can’t fit required courses into their schedules. The second school’s online courses also include home visits that attempt to address lack of student progress due to personal, technical, or motivational challenges.

2. A third school developed online content that enables students to recover specific benchmarks, as well as entire courses. Offering recovery at the benchmark level enables students who are falling behind due to absences to catch up on specific course requirements. In addition, some classes are taught predominantly online for all students in the school.

All three schools reported that having courses online helped to alleviate scheduling problems for students, and that some students were able to recover credits. Common challenges reported across sites were that some teachers are unwilling to teach online courses, and some teachers lack the time and/or the technical skills needed to develop and maintain online courses. In addition, two schools reported that some students are not good candidates for online courses, because they want or need direct instruction from teachers.

Across these three schools, some of these obstacles have been overcome by providing professional development to teachers, as well as gaining greater experience with online courses that has facilitated more effective selection of students and has created greater acceptance of this innovation. However, due to the resource-intensive nature of keeping their online courses updated, two schools are looking into alternatives such as online courses provided by external vendors. (For additional MassGrad lessons learned about credit recovery, refer to the June 2012 Evaluation Brief, available at http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/.)

**Alternative learning.** The four alternative learning programs, described below, primarily serve over-aged and under-credited students who had struggled academically in traditional classroom settings. Some programs take place after school and in the community rather than at the high school. Examples of innovative alternative learning practices are described below.

1. One school partners with a community center to serve students who face a broad range of challenges (e.g., academic, socio-emotional, homelessness, truancy). Compared to the traditional high school, this program offers more one-on-one support, differentiated instruction, and flexible hours.

2. One school provides additional teacher planning time, enabling them to develop a competency-based curriculum and grading system. Some of their classes utilize a “flipped” instructional model, in which students receive support to complete practice activities in the classroom, while the course content is presented online, outside of face-to-face class time.

3. One school offers a transitional after-school learning program in which students receive extra support, with the goal of returning to the regular classroom. The program guides students through competency-based course content and utilizes both traditional and online approaches. Home visits
are offered to provide technical support for the online component or in response to poor attendance.

4. For students who have been unsuccessful in traditional math classes, one program utilizes the E2020 credit recovery math software with a small class size of eight students. Students can also access the software from home. At first this option was only provided to students who had failed math, but its success has led to its expansion to include 9th-grade students designated “at-risk of failing math.”

Two of these alternative learning programs said that engagement and attendance had improved for most students, which school personnel attributed in part to the small class sizes and individualized attention that these models provide. One school had a small pull-out program for students with school anxiety that enabled students to take online courses in which they didn’t have to interact with the whole school population and could work at home for part of the day. Program personnel reported that this program kept some students from dropping out during what would otherwise have been a period of non-attendance. Challenges of this program were that some students were unwilling to transition back to the regular classroom, and some needed more instructional support than was provided by the online course format. Two of the other alternative learning programs also reported challenges with online courses, noting that some students were unable to graduate with their cohort due to the amount of time needed to complete the online courses, and that some teachers preferred greater curricular flexibility than was permitted by the online courses. Some teachers left the alternative learning program due to this concern, and teachers who were more comfortable with the online format stayed.

Conclusions

MassGrad Implementation awardees have developed a diverse range of Alternative Pathways programs, many of which also incorporate aspects of other Implementation award strategies. Program personnel report many practices that they believe will improve or have already improved graduation and dropout rates, and the evaluation will assess these impacts over time as multiple years of student data become available. Informants reported that program successes were due to factors including smaller learning environments, flexibility, team teaching structures and common planning time, community-building activities, improved school culture, strategic student selection processes, additional guidance resources, after-school support, and family and community involvement.

Reported challenges included staffing out-of-school time programs, altering school schedules, union grievances related to equity concerns, the capacity and/or willingness of some personnel to implement time-intensive innovations, and the ability of some students to succeed with innovations that provide less structure and require greater self-motivation. Strategies utilized to address these challenges included offering professional development, hiring external vendors, creating innovative staffing practices, and allowing school personnel to opt out of participating in innovative programs.