Introduction
Welcome to the MassGrad Evaluation Briefs, a series of publications written for participants in the evaluation being conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI). The Briefs will share key findings from evaluation observations, interviews, surveys, and reports. It is a high priority for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) that you receive feedback from the evaluation. Your participation has been very helpful and greatly appreciated.

Background of the Leadership Council
ESE has established a MassGrad Leadership Council that includes representatives from a broad range of state agencies and community, statewide, and national organizations. The Council’s purpose is to support and inform MassGrad activities, to provide expertise and training resources, and to connect the project’s services with other Massachusetts dropout reduction and college and career readiness initiatives.

Summary of Findings
Findings presented in this Evaluation Brief are based on observations of Leadership Council meetings, attendance logs, interviews with four Council members, and an online survey of all Council members (completed by 7 of the 19 members). Key findings include that:

- The Leadership Council has provided members with valuable information and updates regarding MassGrad activities happening in schools and districts across the state;
- Action taken by, or resulting from, participation in the Leadership Council has been limited;
- Members would like to expand and clarify their role in the MassGrad initiative;
- Participation and engagement with Council activities have been limited by low attendance at Council meetings and lagging interest in Council business; and
- In response to member feedback, ESE has restructured Council meetings to engage participants more actively and to facilitate action steps that advance the Council’s agenda.

Successes
Bringing together people who are interested in dropout prevention and recovery. A primary success of the Leadership Council has been to bring together people from across the state who share an interest in dropout prevention and recovery. All survey respondents agreed that Council meetings provide useful opportunities for members to learn from each other about dropout prevention and recovery efforts from
across the state, and that meetings provide useful information about MassGrad-funded activities. Interviewees said that Council meetings have served as a sounding board, providing members with a venue to share their ideas and an opportunity to hear from others doing similar work. Several interviewees commented that members of the Council represent diverse professional perspectives and experiences. Interviewees also said that communication at meetings has been respectful, and that no time has been wasted on contentious debate.

**Restructuring the Graduation Coalition.** A major impact of the Leadership Council has been in relation to the Graduation Coalition. ESE had originally intended to create a coalition of nonprofit, business, and state government organizations that would meet quarterly during the five-year grant period. In response to feedback from the Leadership Council that the coalition would be more effective if locally based and targeted to the needs of local communities, rather than state-level, ESE substantially changed the Coalition’s structure.

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**Challenges**

**Maximizing the Council’s impact and supports for schools and districts.** During one of the initial Leadership Council meetings, members said that they wanted to clarify their purpose and role in relation to the MassGrad initiatives, and that they were eager to provide proactive leadership and direction. In contrast to this vision, most survey respondents (83%) disagreed that the Council has been positioned to provide significant impact on MassGrad-funded dropout prevention work in schools and districts. A majority of respondents (60%) also disagreed that the Council has changed the way that local education professionals access and utilize resources and services for dropout prevention and recovery. One interviewee said, “The primary challenge is figuring out what we can do to have an impact, beyond getting together every quarter to have a discussion. Is there a better role for us? Is there something that we should be doing that we are not doing?”

**Clarifying and expanding the role of the Council.** Survey respondents and interviewees reported that the relationship between the Council and the MassGrad initiative was unclear, and that the Council’s work should be expanded. Only 29% of respondents agreed that they clearly understand the Council’s role in relation to the overall MassGrad initiative, and none agreed that they clearly understand the Council’s role in relation to individual MassGrad programs. A majority (67%) agreed that the Council has supported and informed MassGrad activities, but most (71%) also agreed that the Council’s role should be expanded. One interviewee said, “I think the way the grant is constructed, there is a very narrow role for the Leadership Council. Everything is pretty much prescribed, and I am not sure that there is much of an opportunity to brainstorm other ways of addressing the dropout or graduation rate.”

**Leadership Council meetings are poorly attended.** Interviewees all agreed that poor attendance at Leadership Council meetings has been a challenge. Through May 2012, the average attendance rate was less than 50%. Interviewees noted that many members have limited time to engage in the work, but also that inconsistent attendance may be disrupting the continuity of the Council’s work and decreasing opportunities for members to find meaningful forms of engagement. To improve attendance and engagement, respondents suggested restructuring meeting agendas to allow for more intentional involvement of Council members, as well as holding meetings more often (including some conference calls). Auspicious findings for the Council’s future activities are provided by the 72% of survey respondents who agreed that Council meetings provide value that motivates them to attend future Council meetings and events.
**ESE’s ability to support the work of the Council.** Two interviewees said that ESE may lack the staffing capacity necessary to support and fully utilize the Council’s work. They believed that ESE’s decision to allocate the majority of MassGrad funds for work in schools and districts may limit the department’s ability to support the Council’s work. One interviewee said, “ESE made a good choice to give out the majority of money to the districts, but it would be nice if there was another half or third [of a staff member’s time dedicated to] working on the Leadership Council to glue it together the way they would like.” Another interviewee said, “I am sensitive to the fact that the staff [at ESE] is stretched beyond capacity… I would not want the Leadership Council to be draining the staff by asking questions for which they would have to produce information that they weren’t producing anyway. There needs to be a balance there.”

**Next Steps**

**Clarify the Council’s role.** Interviewee and survey respondents said that clarifying the role of the Council in relation to the MassGrad initiative would help to facilitate a discussion about appropriate next steps.

**Increase the Council’s effectiveness.** Respondents wanted the Leadership Council to be utilized more actively but were uncertain about what an expanded role should entail. One interviewee said, “I would like us to be more impactful. I would like us to be able to leave the meeting and not just feel like I contributed ideas, but that I actually am helping to move the needle, or that I am helping [ESE] staff in a way that eases their burden and has an impact on the end result.” Three respondents suggested that more focused and directed meetings could improve effectiveness. Two suggested structuring meeting agendas to accomplish targeted tasks and to address specific topics. One said, “Come [to meetings] with clear objectives and questions to be answered and use the input from the variety of perspectives represented in a way that demonstrates the value and results of the group’s time and effort.” Other suggestions included expanding discussion among participants, and modeling and promoting the kind of “partnership behavior” that is being sought at the district level.

**Continue to provide oversight and feedback for grant activities.** Interviewees agreed that it is important for the Leadership Council to continue providing oversight and feedback to ESE on specific grant activities (e.g., restructuring the Coalition Challenge) as needed.

Interviewees also suggested the following activities as potential next steps:

- Serving as “critical friends” by asking more questions about progress, metrics, and whether the initiative is on target to meet its goals.
- Helping to identify where the project is making a difference and identifying strategies for magnifying impact.
- Discussing a potential public awareness campaign related to the impacts of the initiative.
- Building capacity and developing strategies for communicating lessons learned and successful practices from the MassGrad programs.
- Discussing the implications of possible changes in dropout prevention legislation, such as an increase in the minimum drop out age, and offering ideas to help districts and the state make that transition effectively.
**Topics of Interest to Council Members**

Council members said that they would like to discuss the following topics at future Council meetings:

- The role that institutions of higher education are playing in MassGrad, and with dropout prevention and recovery efforts more broadly.
- Ways that constituencies represented by Council members can form strategic partnerships with school and district stakeholders to promote and expand the work of the MassGrad initiative.
- The impact of MassGrad programs on graduation and dropout rates, and the implications of these findings (e.g., strategies that should be promoted and replicated, and efficient ways to accelerate progress).
- Policy levers – areas in which the Leadership Council can have the greatest impact.

**New Directions**

In response to feedback from Council members, ESE altered the most recent (May 23rd) Council meeting’s structure to engage participants more actively and facilitate action steps to advance the Council’s agenda. During a presentation on dropout and graduate rate trends for MassGrad sites, ESE personnel encouraged feedback from Council members that led to an energizing discussion of MassGrad’s mission. ESE then led an action-planning activity in which members discussed the Council’s next steps, future directions, and potential contributions. Several members agreed that the Council’s efforts should be focused on educational policy reform, and the group brainstormed a list of potential action steps that included creating recommendations about alternative education, initiating a public information campaign about education trajectories, and identifying and addressing policy barriers. One member cautioned that focusing on a manageable set of issues would be necessary to advance the Council’s agenda effectively. A subcommittee was formed to refine the list of recommendations discussed, and members agreed that this work would continue between Council meetings.