MassGrad Evaluation Briefs
Planning Awards

August 2012

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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 site visits, 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 in the MassGrad evaluation has been very helpful and greatly appreciated.

Background of the Planning Awards and Evaluation

All schools in the MassGrad cohort were eligible to apply for competitive awards of $5,000-$15,000 to conduct planning, needs assessment, and pilot interventions to serve those students most likely to drop out of high school or who have already dropped out. Awardees were required to build on strategies, policies, and programs currently in place and address gaps in current services or procedures. Awards were made to 19 schools in 13 districts, with 10 districts each receiving one award and three districts each receiving three awards. The award period was originally intended to be six months long, from April 1 to September 30, 2011, but was later extended through December 31, 2011 due to the timing of fund disbursement.

Primary evaluation activities included:

A summary report to ESE that asked district coordinators to document their work in relation to each of their project objectives. All 13 awardee districts submitted final reports.

A final survey from UMDI that asked district coordinators to report on the impact of the funding, their collaboration with ESE, and the quality of the Awardee Gatherings. Eleven out of 13 districts responded to the survey.

Successes

As shown in Table 1 (see next page), almost all survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Planning awards enabled their districts to take meaningful steps toward addressing the needs of these students most likely to drop out and/or students that have already dropped out, and provided a catalyst for changes that will yield larger improvements over time. Most also agreed or strongly agreed that the funds were used to address pressing needs related to dropout prevention and/or recovery that otherwise probably would not have been addressed during the current school year. The final item addressed ESE’s question about whether small awards such as these can have a meaningful impact, and clearly most respondents believed that they could. One respondent said, “This money is a great way to design and pilot a small, specific intervention. It was long enough for real planning to occur and covered enough time in the school year to observe implementation.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Agree or Strongly Agree (%)</th>
<th>Neutral (%)</th>
<th>Disagree or Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The MassGrad Planning funds enabled our district to take meaningful steps</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toward addressing the needs of students most likely to drop out and/or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students that have already dropped out.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The MassGrad Planning funds provided a catalyst for changes that, over</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time, will yield larger changes related to dropout prevention and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recovery.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My district's MassGrad Planning funds were used to address pressing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needs related to dropout prevention and/or recovery that we probably</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would not have addressed this school year in the absence of these funds.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting honestly on what my district was able to accomplish with the</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MassGrad Planning funds, I don't think that grants of this scope provide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enough impact to be a worthwhile investment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Awardees were asked to describe their biggest accomplishments with the Planning award. Almost all respondents (N=10) indicated that increased communication related to dropout prevention and recovery was a primary success. This took various forms, such as establishing committees, making group decisions, identifying issues and strategies, and presenting findings and recommendations.

Nine respondents also reported increased knowledge regarding the needs and names of their at-risk students, deficiencies in their early warning indicator and record-keeping systems, and programs and activities that need to be developed. One respondent said, “We believe we have a better understanding of our students, especially our high-risk students.” Another respondent said, “The number of students needing an opportunity to earn credit far exceeded what we expected.”

Six districts reported that they had either already developed an action plan for intervention or were planning intervention programs. One district said, “Our biggest accomplishment was completing an outline for a summer transition program. We were able to narrow down skills and strategies to teach the students that would help them deal with obstacles that may lead to dropping out of school. In addition, we developed objectives, a schedule, and an outline for each day of the program.”

Six awardees reported success in increasing the number of dropout prevention programs available to students. One district said, “Our biggest accomplishment as a whole is having a student graduate from the pilot program over the summer, and having all of the students that were enrolled end up back on track with the peer group that they entered the building with as freshmen.”

Five respondents noted that they had developed or were now actively using early-warning indicator systems to identify at-risk students. Four respondents reported that they had increased access to technology as a learning tool for students, or as an aid for data collection and analysis by staff. Other accomplishments included working with or developing relationships with outside partners or vendors (N=3) and integrating new activities into existing dropout prevention programs (N=2).
Challenges

Time was the most common challenge, with four districts reporting that the planning and scheduling processes took much longer than anticipated. One district said, “It is difficult to go to all the ESE sessions, meet as a team, and balance all of the other school functions.” Another district said, “The team felt rushed. We believe it would have worked better if the award had been available for a full school year.”

Three districts cited staff-related issues, such as a new administrative team taking over during the award period. Budget constraints also limited one district’s capacity to staff its programs. This district reported that “the small number of students we have who need significant credit recovery makes it particularly difficult to allocate funding for staff, curriculum, and online platforms.” A third district cited lack of faculty interest and hoped that positive feedback from students in the pilot program would resolve that challenge. Three districts also mentioned the challenge of poor student attendance, with one district obtaining positive results from increased outreach to students, and another district saying:

What was unresolved is how to pull ALL the students in need back into a climate of success. The “why” is multifaceted: financial needs, child care, schedule flexibility all have a part in a student’s unwillingness and/or inability to benefit from existing activities. “Build it and they will come” did not apply to the district at this time for dropouts returning to school.

Finally, challenges cited by two districts each included establishing an academic support system for at-risk students, researching and analyzing data, and obtaining support from key stakeholders. Other challenges, each cited by a single district, included changes in staff priorities, planning for a wide range of grade levels, and focusing on planning rather than implementation.

Lessons Learned

Respondents were asked what they had learned, and what they would do differently in the future. Six districts had learned the importance of using data to identify at-risk students and target specific student needs. One of these districts had recognized the need to update its record-keeping system.

Five districts reported learning that it was important to include staff members with different expertise and/or the larger community in the planning process, because diverse constituencies learned from each other and produced more useful products. One district said, “It was great to have a Dropout Committee that included guidance, the school nurse, administration, and regular and special education faculty. This collaboration was very effective, and we learned a great deal from each other.” Four respondents mentioned the importance of establishing a meeting schedule that provided adequate time to plan, review objectives, and analyze data.

Three districts learned that their existing dropout prevention and recovery activities needed improvement, and three additional districts noted the importance of involving students in the planning process. Two districts realized that teachers and staff needed additional support to implement new activities, and that “additional school adjustment counselor staffing is needed to further case manage those students who have dropped out.” Finally, one district reported, “It would be better to reduce the number of students who need the dropout prevention activities, by proactively building options during the semester and not just at the end.”

Unanticipated Consequences

Respondents were asked if they had observed any important but unanticipated consequences of their Planning award activities. Four respondents said that Planning award activities had increased student and teacher interaction. One district reported that students appreciated having a voice in the planning process, so the district provided opportunities for students to discuss problems and solutions. One respondent said,
Teachers stated that exploration of the data – particularly from student focus groups and student surveys – had an immediate impact on their teaching practices (e.g., clarity of learning objectives, increased vocabulary work, focus on oral interaction, and providing encouragement and informal positive feedback to ELL students).

Respondents also said that teachers are increasingly discussing the issue of dropout prevention among themselves and with students, and that in some cases this has led to improved student-teacher bonds. Three respondents said that Planning award activities had enhanced relationships among schools within their district. Two districts noted that research and analysis were not only used to identify at-risk students, but also to support the implementation of better teaching practices. Finally, two districts reported that Planning award activities had increased student and staff motivation.

Next Steps

Respondents were asked to share their next steps in advancing the work that was supported by the Planning award. Seven respondents reported collecting or analyzing data as a next step, mentioning plans to examine data from pilot activities, present information to school faculty, and hold joint student record review sessions between middle and high schools. Seven districts also said that they would continue their planning activities, such as using assessment data to plan activities that target student needs.

Six districts planned to continue their piloting and/or implementation activities. Three of these districts planned to implement credit recovery programs, two planned to expand alternative vocational programs, and one each planned to develop graduation coaching, create an early warning indicator system, and review the roles of guidance counselors in order to better serve students and their families.

Technical Support

Survey respondents rated the quality of the support they received from ESE very highly, as shown in Table 2. They were also asked if they had other comments about the support they received from ESE, and five districts thanked ESE for providing quality, professional, quick responses and support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Excellent (%)</th>
<th>Good (%)</th>
<th>Fair (%)</th>
<th>Poor (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When I called ESE for assistance, the quality of the support I received was…</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I emailed ESE for assistance, the quality of the support I received was…</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When ESE staff visited my site, the quality of the support I received was …</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked about the two Awardee Gatherings that took place during the Planning award period, and nine of the respondents reported attending both gatherings. Almost all respondents agreed that the gatherings provided productive opportunities to learn from colleagues from other districts (90%), and to network with colleagues from other districts (70%). Most (80%) also agreed that the gatherings were helpful in supporting their Planning award activities.