MassGrad Evaluation Briefs
Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group

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Introduction
The MassGrad Evaluation Briefs are a series of publications written for participants in the evaluation being conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMD). The Briefs will share key findings from evaluation 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 has been very helpful and greatly appreciated.

Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group
The Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group is a partnership among ESE and 133 schools from 76 districts in the MassGrad school cohort. The New England Comprehensive Center (NECC) provides technical assistance at Work Group meetings. The Work Group is intended to provide opportunities for networking, sharing promising approaches, and creating an “infrastructure of collaboration around all topics concerning dropout reduction.” The Work Group existed for two years prior to the MassGrad award but has been expanded to include more districts and activities.

Schools/districts participating in the Work Group are expected to create a team of staff that will engage in Work Group activities and be primarily responsible for ongoing local needs assessments, analysis of early indicator data, collaboration with other MassGrad school teams, and implementation of expanded programs and services. The teams are expected to include not only staff of target schools but also district-level representatives to ensure alignment with district-wide goals and initiatives as well as staff from feeder middle schools to vertically coordinate student support programs and services.

The evaluation has included interviewing Work Group members, observing gatherings and webinars, and conducting a survey of all group members. This brief will share findings from these evaluation activities.

Evaluation Interview & Observation Findings

Work Group Meeting Sessions. Feedback from Work Group members suggests that the case consultancy and concurrent breakout sessions at Work Group meetings have been especially valued and beneficial. Work group meetings have also provided opportunities for unstructured networking and sharing of knowledge and resources. Participants have said that they are eager to learn about each other’s efforts, including why particular strategies are selected and how they are implemented.

Team Planning Time. Optional team planning time has been scheduled at the end of Work Group meetings, and some districts have stayed to discuss internal program needs and action plans. One participant commented on the irony of having to travel halfway across the state to meet with team members from her school, but she acknowledged that such opportunities are valuable.

For inquiries about the evaluation, please contact Patricia Lee at the UMass Donahue Institute: PLee@donahue.umassp.edu, (413) 587-2402
Survey Findings

An online survey was sent in March 2012 to ESE’s Work Group email list, and 85 out of 314 recipients (27%) responded. Due to the low response rate, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as they might not be representative of Work Group members as a whole. Responses were received from 46 of the 52 participating school districts.

Work Group Events

Benefits of Participating in Events. The majority of survey respondents who had participated in Work Group events agreed that their participation had provided many benefits, as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of Participation in Work Group Events (N=52)</th>
<th>Agreed or Strongly Agreed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Work Group has provided…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful opportunities for districts to learn from each other.</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful opportunities for networking.</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one idea that I can use to improve dropout prevention and recovery efforts in my school/district.</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful opportunities to learn from outside experts in dropout prevention and recovery work.</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value that motivates me to attend future Work Group meetings and events.</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful resources for carrying out dropout prevention and recovery work in my own school.</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked how participation in the Work Group has changed the way members access and utilize dropout prevention and recovery resources, the three most common responses were that it has increased: a) knowledge of ESE’s work, resources and programs across the state; b) access to best practices in the field; and c) professional networks.

ESE Supports

Satisfaction with ESE Support. The survey asked whether Work Group members who had requested support from ESE were satisfied with the support they received. Of the 40 respondents who said that they had requested support, 32 (79%) were satisfied, 7 (18%) were neutral, and 1 (3%) was not satisfied.

Additional ESE Support Requested. Fifteen members responded to the question “What additional Work Group supports from ESE would be helpful?” Their responses focused on wanting additional professional development and networking opportunities. Professional development interests included grant-writing workshops, cost-effective best practices for smaller schools, strategies for working with ELL students, strategies for developing buy-in from central administrative staff and community members, attending more site visits to other Work Group schools, and experts to train faculty and administrators.

Conclusion

Initial evaluation findings have shown that the Work Group is providing events and resources consistent with its mission. One respondent shared, “I enjoy the opportunity to hear from other districts [at Work Group events], and I feel encouraged that some of the frustrating issues are not ours alone, but that districts across the state are grappling with the same issues.” Members expressed interest in continuing the event formats from the past year, as well as expanded networking and professional development opportunities.