**Adult Advocates for Student Support**

**MassGrad Summary Brief**

**March 2016**

## **Introduction**

This brief shares promising practices, successes, and challenges from the “adult advocates” programs implemented in 14 high schools during the 2011–12 through 2014–15 school years. It is one of five briefs based on evidence-based strategies for dropout prevention utilized by schools that received “Implementation Awards” through the MassGrad initiative.1

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education and implemented by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), MassGrad’s primary goal was “to substantially increase the number of students who earn a high school diploma.” MassGrad targeted the 133 schools from 76 districts that exceeded the statewide annual dropout rate of 2.9 percent during the 2008–09 school year.

In its MassGrad Implementation Award materials, ESE described the adult advocates strategy as “two types of counseling/professional staff to support positive student outcomes through supporting prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts at the local level: 1) graduation/readiness coaches and 2) re-engagement/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.”

**Promising Practices**

*Successful advocates are adults who know how to listen and how to be empathic, but who also recognize that they are not there to be the student’s friend. They are there to give advice, to point students toward resources, to bring a kid to a resource if necessary—but not to be doing things for them, and not making excuses for them.*

– A MassGrad adult advocate

Many of the MassGrad schools that implemented the adult advocates strategy utilized common elements, but they do not comprise a set of prescribed models that were replicated across sites. These schools assigned adult advocates to students who were deemed at highest risk of dropping out, based on factors such as attendance, grades, credit accumulation, discipline problems, and motivation.

While building relationships with students, adult advocates also put plans and services in place, helped students set and monitor goals to keep them on track to graduate, provided academic and socio-emotional support, called families, conducted home visits, and tried to recover students who had dropped out of school. The practices described in this section were reported as showing promise by program personnel and school administrators in on-site and phone interviews and written reports.

**Building relationships.** Most adult advocates talked about the importance of adults building individualized relationships with students, explaining that these trusting relationships increase student accountability and success in school. One advocate said, “It’s important that students have adults at the school who care about them, that they have a sense that they’re visible and have advocates in the building, and that they feel comfortable enough to come in and stay.” Another advocate said, “It’s 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.”

To develop strong relationships with students, advocates provided the variety of academic, socio-emotional, and wraparound supports described in this brief. They also invested in getting to the know the student personally, and often some of the student’s friends and family members. Advocates described the role as being a student’s “cheerleader” and also as “chasing” students who haven’t visited recently. An administrator described one advocate who looked for a student after school on a nearby sports field where she knew he was playing baseball, saying that “it meant a lot to the kid to be hounded.”

**Providing effective staffing.** Several schools used adult advocates who spent from 2 to 6 hours per week working with from 3 to 25 students in addition to their full-time roles within the school. While some schools continued to use this model, two schools changed to the part-time or full-time model described next. Many of the advocates at these two schools felt overwhelmed by the role’s responsibilities when added to their other full-time duties. Some also felt that the stipend was too small for the magnitude of the responsibilities, so they left their adult advocate role after the first year.

Most schools utilized part-time or full-time adult advocates who worked with from 20 to 100 students and had backgrounds in social work, counseling, and/or school administration. The part-time and full-time advocates appeared more able to focus on the role than the personnel who were serving as advocates for only a few hours per week. Due to their greater number of available hours and schedule flexibility, they were also able to utilize a broader range of times and approaches to support students, such as pulling students out of class, utilizing time during study hall, and/or leading an advisory period.

Two districts partnered with community centers that provided graduation and recovery advocates. One of the community centers had a recovery team that conducted street outreach, looking for students who had dropped out of high school and who might be a good fit for the center’s diploma program. The other community center provided advocates to the students who participated in its programs. In addition, program administrators in another district enlisted three community-based advocates for one high school to reduce the caseloads of the 20

**Spotlight: Phoenix Charter Academy**

Phoenix Charter Academy in Chelsea actively recruits older students, many of whom have dropped out of high school. Their two adult advocates funded by MassGrad served as the Coordinator of Retention and Support and the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Support. Each adult advocate managed a caseload of 12–15 of the school’s most

at-risk students, providing support through phone calls, conversations, and check-ins regarding the student’s grades and behavior. The advocates communicated frequently with each student’s teachers, parents/guardians, and in some cases an additional “adult supporter” identified by the student or arranged by the school in collaboration with community partners. Students who were falling behind in academics received support in developing a plan to make up work, attend “homework lab,” or receive additional tutoring.

Advocates also had other duties that supported engagement and retention of a larger group of students, such as overseeing recruitment activities and supervising AmeriCorps fellows who worked intensively on the school’s “Attendance Transformation Team.” In the process of re-engaging students who had dropped out of school, the adult advocates worked closely with students and their families to develop plans to navigate challenges such as establishing a morning routine, changing work schedules, linking to support services, and helping teen parents obtain childcare vouchers. A strength of the school was their ongoing evaluation of program impacts and identification of unmet needs. The school improved their adult advocates work over time by making changes based on their ongoing evaluation of program impacts and identification of unmet needs.

school staff members who were serving as advocates. They also thought that the community-based advocates might be more effective for some students who were having difficulty “connecting in the school building.” One of the community advocates was a retired teacher from the district, and the others were tutors who were already working with students from the school.

Personnel from three schools said that they had come to believe that successful adult advocates shared common personality traits and characteristics. Specifically, they believed that an advocate should be supportive and encouraging while also pushing students to reach their full potential. One of them said, “The best advocates and the best mentors are folks who can help facilitate students becoming their own advocates, and folks … who can make the students think globally, make them think about the big picture, about the future. Because in the long run, that is what is going to help.”

**Supporting students’ academic needs.** Academic supports varied by school, but manyadult advocates provided tutoring, helped students with homework or test preparation, escorted them to class to reduce truancy, sat with them during online credit recovery courses, helped them arrange and conduct meetings with teachers, monitored their progress, and intervened when risk indicators such as poor grades or attendance were identified. Some schools provided bilingual adult advocates who provided supports to English language learners, such as translation and classroom support when ELL teachers were not available. Some advocates provided study skills and college preparation workshops. Finally, some advocates supported summer transition programs and freshman seminars that highlighted issues related to successful high school completion and the differences between middle school and high school. One advocate explained,

*In 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.*

**Supporting students’ socio-emotional needs.** Many adult advocates provided socio-emotional supports that included discussion and problem solving related to students’ personal challenges, connecting them with services and resources inside and outside of school, contacting parents or caregivers, conducting home visits, being on call outside of school hours, providing transportation to and from school, accompanying students to medical or court appointments, and providing individual or group counseling.

These activities intersected with the work of other student support personnel within the school, such as school adjustment counselors and social workers, and adult advocates often participated in student support team meetings or individualized education plan (IEP) meetings with those other personnel in order to coordinate supports more effectively. Adult advocates’ level of prior training in providing socio-emotional support varied widely and to some extent determined the types of interventions in which they were involved. Notably, one school moved away from having adult advocates focus mainly on socio-emotional needs when they concluded that students who had primarily received academic support from their adult advocates demonstrated more progress than students who had primarily received socio-emotional support.

**Setting and following up on student goals.** One site reported that advocates worked closely with students to document each student’s school schedule and identify three goals and a corresponding action plan to mitigate potential obstacles to graduation. The advocates and students reviewed grades, credits, course requirements, MCAS scores, and attendance. The site reported that setting goals early in the school year and identifying specific problem behaviors (e.g., poor attendance) increased the student’s awareness of those behaviors and provided opportunities for change. Periodically, students also wrote a reflective piece with their advocate, describing the progress that they had made toward each goal. The process was so successful that the principal expanded it to include all students in the school.

**Tracking student information.** Many advocates and sites used paper forms and online systems to track student data. At two sites, advocates used an intake form that captured student information such as the names and phone numbers of the student, parents/guardians, and friends. Advocates at these sites also used “encounter forms” to capture information related to each of their meetings with students, such as the date, topic of discussion, next steps for the student, and next steps for the advocate.

**Spotlight: Putnam Vocational Technical Academy**

The full-time adult advocate funded by MassGrad at the Putnam Vocational Technical Academy in Springfield was a certified school adjustment counselor. He worked mostly with 11th and 12th graders who were identified as at risk for dropping out using the district’s early warning system, which considers indicators such as attendance, MCAS performance, mobility, and suspensions. Supports provided to these students included check-ins, meetings with teachers and parents/guardians, and facilitating their enrollment in MCAS preparation and after-school or summer programs.

The advocate also reached out through calls and home visits to students who had dropped out of the school, urging them to re-enroll or facilitating their transition to alternative diploma programs as well as GED programs and Job Corps. As needed, the advocate helped these students to secure resources such as child care, housing, mental health services, and health insurance that would help them to re-enroll and enable them to focus on earning their diploma.

The level of collaboration within the school and across the district was notable. The advocate met twice per month with a team that included student support personnel and classroom teachers to personalize supports for individual students. In addition, a monthly meeting of advocates from all schools in the district enabled mutual support, mentoring, and sharing of strategies and resources. Putnam’s dropout rate improved substantially during the years of the MassGrad initiative, and school personnel attributed the gains in part to the adult advocate intervention.

Two sites used technology to improve access to information for advocates and program managers. For example, one site set up a secure Google Drive system that enabled advocates to view, download, and update student documentation from anywhere at any time. The program manager had access to all of the files and was able to review students’ status more efficiently and save time that had previously been spent meeting with advocates to obtain the same information.

**Re-engaging dropouts.** Adult advocates at several schools focused on recovering and re-engaging dropouts. Strategies included sending letters home, calling students and parents/guardians, visiting students at home, or conducting outreach in the community. When students expressed interest in returning, an adult advocate at one school worked with students and reviewed their transcripts to create individualized coursework completion plans.

**Holding events for students and advocates.** One school held monthly events for all students who worked with adult advocates. The events were one to two hours long. Half of the time was structured (e.g., guest speakers, stress management workshops), and half of the time was unstructured, so students could socialize with peers and work with their advocates.

**Managing excess demand.** In many schools, need was greater than the availability of adult advocates. In these situations, schools targeted a subset of at-risk students to maximize benefits in relation to the school’s goals. For example, some schools prioritized students who attended school regularly but continued to be academically unsuccessful over students who were chronically absent and did not respond to re-engagement efforts. Other schools preferred to focus their efforts on recovering dropouts despite their low responsiveness. One school reported that students who met with their adult advocate frequently were given preference for an advocate in the subsequent school year. Similarly, some students who seldom met with

their advocate were replaced by students who were on a waiting list. Some sites targeted 11th- and 12th-grade students, with the rationale that they were closer to graduation and needed the support more urgently.

**Providing tiered levels of support.** Another way that schools managed their capacity was by providing different levels of support to different students. Student caseloads ranged from 10 to 100 students per advocate, and 20 to 30 students was typical. The ratio of students to advocates reflected local priorities including the intensity of the intervention and the number of students in need of support at various levels of intervention. One school created a two-tiered model of support. Each advocate had about 20 students in the “first tier” who received intensive support. Advocates met with these students multiple times per week, attended student support team meetings where these students were discussed, and met with the students’ guidance counselors. Each advocate also had about 10 students in a “second tier” identified by the school as having a lower risk of dropping out but still needing support. The advocates tracked these students’ grades and attendance and checked in with them less frequently than with the first tier students, but if monitoring indicated increased need, then the advocates provided extra support.

**Determining pairings with student input.** Three sites reported that pairings between students and adult advocates that took student preferences into account were more successful than random pairings. One site allowed students to indicate their first and second choice of advocates with whom they wanted to be paired. An administrator said, “This is a major shift. We try to accommodate the selections to the best of our ability. We aren’t able to match every single student to their first choice, but we did match 70–75 percent.” The sites reported that students typically selected an adult with whom they had a pre-existing positive relationship or had met recently and connected with quickly.

**Providing training and professional development.** Adult advocates often need skills that are typically expected from guidance and student support personnel. Some adult advocates reported that they had participated in valuable training and ongoing professional development in these skills, while others received minimal training. One school held a monthly meeting of all advocates, which was used to share strategies, provide mutual support, and host visitors, such as guidance staff, who could share useful knowledge and strategies. Administrators at one school identified personnel whom they believed were the school’s most effective adult advocates and utilized them as informal trainers of other adult advocates in the school. Advocates at some schools also reported needing more clarity about their expected roles; some sites addressed this need by providing a job description or an “advocates manual.”

**Successes and Challenges**

Many successes and challenges are embedded in the promising practices and program spotlight sections of this summary brief. Additional successes and challenges are introduced in this section.

Personnel from all schools believed that adult advocates were helping students graduate, keeping students from dropping out, and/or re-engaging dropouts. Personnel at many schools also reported that having an adult advocate helped students to improve their grades, attendance, behavior, and motivation to do well in school. Some students reported having someone supporting them and checking in with them about their work was helpful because it made them feel more accountable and they did not want to disappoint their advocate. As a result of their deepened relationships with adults, some students also felt a stronger sense of belonging to the school. Adult advocates reported that in some cases they became the main adult in the student’s life who encouraged and believed in them, and that these types of supports were important to the student’s success.

Many advocates said that they were less effective with their students who were absent frequently. Several sites also reported that they regretted not having enough funding to hire adult advocates for every at-risk student. These sites said that additional advocates would have reduced the pressure to expand the caseloads of existing advocates. In addition, all sites anticipated financial challenges in continuing to provide adult advocates after the MassGrad funding period. However, most sites reported that the adult advocates had been so effective that their schools and districts had committed to continuing the program, albeit often at reduced levels, using district or grant funding.

**Footnote**

1. The five summary briefs will be accessible through a subpage of <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr>.

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