

Malden MassGrad Coalition Case Study

A look at the development, key decisions, and lessons learned of the Malden’s Promise Coalition and its strategies to improve graduation rates and provide a stronger city-wide system of support for youth at risk of dropping out.

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Coalition Partners

Malden City Hall / Mayor’s Office

Malden Public Schools

Malden YMCA

Malden YWCA

Cambridge Health Alliance

Hallmark Health

Malden Irish American Club

Malden Police Department

Malden Fire Department

Malden School PTOs

Malden Early Learning Center

Malden Teen Enrichment Center

Malden Faith Based Roundtable

Parnership for Community Schools in Malden

Malden Latino Council

Bread of Life

Malden Boy Scouts

Association for Arab American Women

Malden Girl Scouts

Malden Access Television

Housing Families

Malden Pop Warner

Career Place

Malden City Council

Malden Chamber of Commerce

Immigrant Learning Center

South Bay Mental Health

Salvation Army

SEPAC

Latino Parent Club

Wah Lum Kung Fu

Salvation Army

Chinese Culture Connection

Regional Employment Board

Job Corps

Youth Harbors/Rediscovery

Through the MassGrad Initiative, funded by the federal High School Graduation Initiative, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) awarded four competitive awards in 2012 throughout the state to help ignite school-community coalitions. These four *MassGrad Coalition Challenge Awards* required recipients to focus on a specific topic area related to dropout reduction and improving graduation rates that warranted a school-community partnership response.

**Malden Public Schools received a MassGrad Coalition Challenge Award to develop a coalition between the schools, the city (particularly the Mayor’s office), and community organizations and agencies that would work together to address the needs of Malden youth and become the “hub” for youth issues in the city.**

This case study describes: the core coalition activities, the key steps and decisions, how the coalition works, impact, and lessons learned from the first three years of implementation (2012-13 school year through the 2014-15 school year). The case study ends with the future outlook of the coalition and some questions to consider based on the experiences of Malden.

## Overview Core Activities

The Malden Coalition decided to focus on three action areas: communication across schools and community organizations, mental health and substance use issues that cause students to miss school and drop out, and creating a network of adult advocates.

* Developed Malden 411, a mobile application that connects youth and families to education, parenting, employment, housing, food, and other resources in the community
  + Created by Malden High School students with information provided by a wide range of community organizations
* Organizes a “Graduation Gurus” initiative that trains adults from across the city (e.g., educators, community organization staff, volunteers) to be mentors and adult advocates focused on helping middle and high school students stay on track for graduation
* Offers bi-monthly training for coalition members on key issues impacting youth, (e.g., restorative justice, mental health first aid, substance abuse, youth risk behavior indicators)

## How the Coalition Developed:

## Key Steps & Decisions

**Year One**

* After four months of planning by an initial working group, the Mayor convened 35-40 community organization representatives, including the superintendent of schools, at City Hall for an initial meeting
  + The group used a strategic visioning process to identify organizational interests and priorities
  + People quickly gravitated toward citywide ideas that included the need for adult advocates, a focus on youth mental health issues, substance abuse, and the need for everyone to know more about available resources
* There was early recognition that “we have lots of things going on but no organized way to access them” and that a main goal of the coalition should be to help provide students and families with quick, efficient access to community resources
* After the initial meeting, the coalition established a tri-chair leadership structure made up of representatives from the Mayor’s office, school district, and community
* The coalition also established smaller, collaborative work groups (e.g., training, marketing, etc.) that began digging into and designing core strategies
* Much of the first year focused on building partner relationships; developing training, mentor recruitment, and other materials for the Graduation Gurus effort; and overseeing development of the mobile resource app
* The biggest questions, choices, or decisions the Coalition wrestled with this first year were:
  + Establishing a strong initial focus for its work
  + Identifying methods to make sure city leaders stayed actively engaged in the work i.e. celebrations, email blasts, individual outreach meetings, direct links to Mayor and high school principal, presentation to school committee, etc.
  + Figuring out how best to “’work on a citywide basis” and spread the work across partners organizations (effectively creating and managing collaborative workgroups)

**Year Two**

* By its second year, the coalition had established itself as the citywide table for youth issues and a mechanism for connecting schools and community resources
* After six months of planning work, coalition partners hosted the first round of Graduation Guru training - the Graduation Guru campaign included roughly 20 Gurus, who met with students after school hours, reviewed academics, explored students’ non-academic challenges, discussed life skills, etc.
* The coalition also ran a small-scale but effective [multimedia campaign](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMppuC42W2c) to spread word about Malden’s Promise and organized a citywide annual celebration at the end of the year to spread awareness and honor students and programmatic efforts
* The biggest questions, choices, or decisions the Coalitions wrestled with this year were:
  + How to track the impact of their work on youth and partner organizations
  + What is the right balance of Coalition members – finding the right fit between leaders and “doers” balancing member interests, e.g., some struggled to find the right fit between people close to the ground interested in programming rather than policy

**Year Three**

* As the Coalition entered its third year, the work began to shift away from providing programmatic solutions, e.g. the mobile resource app and Graduation Gurus program, which were now up and running
* The Coalition began to focus more on its role as “citywide connector,” particularly related to collaborative professional development strategies that would bring educators and staff from community-based organizations together
  + This resulted in a first for the city – a special citywide professional development day (using a school district teacher professional development day) where community members, youth workers, and others sat together with Malden High teachers to look at how adults can better support the mental health needs of young people
* The biggest questions, choices, or decisions the Coalitions wrestled with this year were:
  + Revisiting the role of the coalition, should the Coalition keep running programs or should it become a citywide effort that “makes things happen”?
  + How to evolve from a grant funded coalition to one that has little or no dollar resources to support facilitation of the coalition and its work (support for the “glue”)
  + Possible burnout of the tri-chairs and restructuring to provide additional capacity and new, more formalized roles for members (steering committee, roles/responsibilities, and expectations for involvement established)

## How the Coalition Works

* Tri-chairs representing the school district, city hall, and the community, coordinate and support Coalition meetings, e.g., create agendas, facilitate meetings, and provide follow-up notes and support
* After each meeting, the tri-chairs meet to debrief and develop their support strategy
* The Coalition also breaks into workgroups, some short term and some standing depending on priorities (e.g., marketing, foundational elements (governance), youth issues, training) - workgroups typically meet at partner locations and are facilitated by Coalition members
* The coalition as a whole meets monthly at City Hall – viewed as “neutral turf” and because it symbolizes an “all Malden youth” agenda
* A typical coalition meeting agenda covers standing items (progress on core strategies like the Malden 411 app, Graduation Gurus, etc.) and provides time for “rapid response” issues that come up and discussion of longer term thinking and planning of interest to members
* Meetings are open to any new members who would like to join
* Between full Coalition meetings, some members report internally, e.g., to their boards, to the Mayor, at staff meetings
* Subcommittees also meet outside of the coalition meetings
* The Coalition’s structure has created new working relationships across community organizations and has spawned additional pockets of people working together on other projects including a citywide Latino festival, addressing issues surrounding homelessness, parent engagement and other pieces of work related to supporting Malden’s youth
* As the coalition transitions to life beyond the grant, they are creating a new steering committee structure (partner roles/commitments spelled out) and a new meeting process (training/business meetings rotated every other month)
* Over the course of the three years, the meeting strategy shifted so that meetings rotate between business and keeping work on track and training on a key youth issue

## Lessons Learned

* In the early stages, the “process was the product” – the coalition needed a process and time to help build critical relationships and mobilize people and organizations across the city
* Initially, the coalition focused on getting everyone involved – a good thing – but eventually settled into having a core group of “doers with access to leadership” and keeping a broader group of people in the loop regularly
  + This core group of coalition members is excited about working together and feeds off the shared admiration they have for one another
  + As a group, they also feel they have the critical set of skills they need (visioning, facilitation, organization/management) to be sturdy but nimble and resilient
* Using the tri-chair structure (schools, city/city hall, and community) has been hugely successfully to provide a “richness of thought, ideas, and balance” and accelerating the process of learning each other’s languages, modeling collaborative behavior, etc.
  + Running the effort solely from the schools, even though it focuses on graduation rates, would not have allowed the coalition to achieve what it did in terms of citywide engagement and reach
* It takes time and “glue” to keep a multifaceted collaborative initiative on track; people need to feel as if the coalition work they are doing is in their interest, naturally fits into their role and priorities, is not an add-on, and uses their time well
  + Over time, the coalition got better at managing itself, e.g., supporting, activating and de-activating workgroups (rather than letting them run longer than necessary)
  + Most importantly, it established a clearer vision for its role in the community and is repositioning as more of a connecting and leveraging mechanism than a program provider
* The Coalition is committed to celebrating its accomplishments once a year in a way that allows leaders and the community to see the impact; a city-wide yearly celebration with all city department heads (e.g., police, fire, city hall, youth programs, schools, after school efforts, mental health orgs, city council)

## Impact

* Increase in referrals between agencies *(“I could never do my job the same way again…without the coalition I would have so much less to support the work I do” – coalition member)*
* Dropout rate has decreased and the graduation rate has increased at Malden High School
* Coalition has opened new doors for staff and leadership (Mayor, HS principal, leads at city’s two major health organizations, city councilors, YM/YWCA, faith based orgs, etc. all actively involved)
* Collaboration (everyone at one table) to focus on priority areas (youth mental health, substance abuse, adult advocates) allows for focused conversations and collaborative strategy development *(“The connection with school day staff has increased tremendously. Now I have a personal connection with staff that I can call and either talk through an issue or get referrals.”)*
* Increase in awareness of/use of community services, resources and how/who to access, faster response times as coalition members connect around case loads *(“It’s a whole new way to do business. (This coalition has built an infrastructure by which we can work together with the city, schools and the other community agencies. My job has become both easier and more effective because of the foundation this coalition has built”)*
* Building new capacity – cross-training of adults that support youth which has never done before, for example the professional development day at the high school that brought in community members (CBO’s, mental health workers, case managers, etc.) to focus on youth and adult trauma and mental health and how staff can help/get in the way of supporting youth and family needs
* Coalition members report that the coalition has moved “dropout prevention” from an issue that was always seen as the schools problem to increasing awareness and ownership as a community issue (doesn’t start or stop at high school)
* More alignment with those who work with youth outside of school and before they drop out (teen center, HS staff, guidance/school adjustment counselors.)

• More program options: a) adult advocates grown from a high school program that includes trained advocates from across agencies and across the community – not just teachers from the schools, b) youth voice on mental health – positive opportunity for youth, developing awareness and educating staff and providers – as well as confidence builders for young people participating – both reporting positive direct impact on youth.

* Greater community awareness: web application (Malden 411) providing contact information for youth-focused services available to Malden residents. Faster, more efficient way for care givers to know where to refer youth and families as well as youth and families themselves.
* Over 85% of Coalition members responding to a survey report strong benefits provided in the following areas: learning new skills, developing valuable relationships, feeling a sense of personal fulfillment in working to reduce and recover dropouts, and feeling a sense of professional fulfillment in working to reduce and recover dropouts

## Future Outlook

The coalition is “expanding our work, not retreating” despite a sizeable shift in funding. Members feel it has proven its value to partners, has credibility across the community, and strong support from the mayor.

* Possibility of new chairs is being phased in using a selection process designed “to keep the spirit of hard work and collaboration intact”
* The coalition is also revising other aspects of its structure; for example, creating a steering committee of organizations with specific role descriptions and formal agreements (what it means to be a member, responsibilities, what you give, what you get)
* The group is looking at the next phase of its work – cross-cutting ideas that will have the most impact on at risk youth in the city, e.g., a youth response system (like 911 but for youth services and support), a community-wide parent academy, and more cross-sector training on youth mental health, cross system community awareness events

Case Study Questions

1. The Malden’s Promise coalition had a citywide vision from the start and chose a “get everyone in the room” strategy to launch the coalition. The strategic visioning and engagement process that followed required careful facilitation and took time. What were the benefits of doing it this way? What were some of the challenges or drawbacks? By the end of the second year, the Coalition had what members call a core group of “doers with access to leaders” – not everyone who was involved in first year activities. Some might argue that it might have been better to focus on a core group of manageable highly committed organizations first, and then grow involvement. What do you think?
2. The Malden coalition has small stipend positions; for example, there is no paid coalition coordinator or director. Instead, they have used a tri-chair structure to manage coordination and workgroups made up of partner staff who are released by leadership to participate. The tri-chair structure evolved organically, without a lot of forethought, and three strong people stepped into the roles. The approach ended up being a powerful way to facilitate a cross-section of community life. After three years, the coalition has decided to create a more formal steering committee to help drive and manage the work. What are the advantages and challenges of Malden’s approach to coalition management?