**Alternative Pathways to a High School Diploma**

**MassGrad Summary Brief**

**October 2015**

## **Introduction**

This brief shares promising practices, successes, and challenges from the “alternative pathways” programs implemented in 17 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 alternative pathways strategy as the development of new programs or schools that create smaller, more tailored environments to address the specific needs of certain populations of students and provide alternative pathways to a high school diploma. These programs or schools could run during the school day, after school, or at community-based organizations.

**Promising Practices**

*When young people come into this program, you have to want them to get their diploma more than they want it. You have to be passionately dedicated to them, and eventually they will become as passionate as you are….It’s a process, and young people are all at different points on the path. But we have seen the success stories, and that gives us hope.* – An alternative pathways program administrator

The alternative pathways programs varied widely in terms of strategies, scope, and participants. Most programs targeted students who were considered to be at-risk for dropping out, although others were provided to a more diverse student population, such as a career readiness curriculum provided to all 9th graders. Many programs had common elements, but they do not comprise a set of prescribed models that were replicated across sites. 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.

**Team teaching.** The personnel of alternative pathways programs often worked together for an extended period of time each day. This enabled teachers and specialists to collaborate and forge meaningful connections across subject areas that enriched learning. For example, one site combined English and history courses to create a “humanities” block. Staff members worked closely with each other to integrate the content of the two courses to create meaningful and context-rich learning experiences. This site also combined mathematics and science curricula by requiring students once per quarter to complete project-based learning activities that combined the two disciplines. Programs that supported team teaching often had common planning time and meetings to share information about students and develop program strategies. In some schools, teachers used common practices that they had developed collaboratively as a teaching team (e.g., reading approaches, notebook organization, and grading policies), which they said improved student behavior, engagement, and academic performance.

**Building relationships and community.** One of the most common program elements across sites was deliberately strengthening relationships and fostering a sense of community among students, school personnel, and community members. In discussions with ESE personnel, many students reported that their relationships with program staff were the primary reason that they liked their alternative pathways program. Team teaching and keeping student-teacher ratios low were common strategies to strengthen interpersonal connections. One program also assigned students to faculty advisors from outside the program, so that they had relationships with adults elsewhere in the school. Another school spoke frequently with students who were struggling academically to help them understand that the school cared about them and was invested in helping them graduate. Explicit community building activities included program-wide meetings (focused on topics such as bullying and appropriate Internet use), field trips (such as visits to Thompson Island and the Blue Hills in the Boston area), and family dinners at the school that featured topics such as choosing classes for the subsequent school year.

**Providing socio-emotional supports.** Several programs developed structures and provided services to address the substantial socio-emotional needs of their students. These included counseling, home visits, and, at one school, a restorative justice approach to school discipline. One program enabled students with school anxiety to take online courses at school for part of the day and at home for part of the day. This provided some separation from the school population and reportedly prevented some students from dropping out. Some students were unwilling to transition back to the regular classroom, however, and some needed more instructional support than the online courses provided. One program addressed teacher fatigue from providing a high level of socio-emotional supports by having them work in the alternative pathways program for part of the day and in the main high school for part of the day. Personnel from multiple programs mentioned the importance of simply allowing students to speak briefly about whatever was troubling them in their personal lives, after which they were able to focus more effectively on their academic work.

**Re-engaging dropouts.** Several programs focused on re-engaging students who had already dropped out of high school. Most of these students were over-aged and under-credited, had work or family responsibilities, and/or had mental health or financial needs that served as barriers to completing their diploma. To help students fulfill work or parenting schedules, some programs provided flexible hours, such as afternoon/evening programs or online courses that could be completed off-site or whenever the student was able to come to the school building or program site. Other programs provided the socio-emotional supports described above such as counseling and home visits, or wraparound services such as support in finding housing or child care. Last, several programs provided coaches who reached out to dropouts in an attempt to re-engage them and then provided transition and ongoing support to students who returned to school.

**Offering flexible schedules.** Already mentioned above in relation to socio-emotional supports and re-engaging dropouts, flexible schedules were a feature of multiple alternative pathways programs. Additional examples included a program that allowed students to have extended absences and then return when ready, and an online credit recovery program that allowed students to come in for two-and-a-half hour blocks in the morning, in the afternoon, or both, depending on their preferred trade-off between attending to non-school commitments versus accumulating credits toward graduation. The credit recovery program had a maximum number of allowable absences, but they allowed students to “earn back” absences by coming to school on designated weekend or vacation days, attending both the morning and afternoon blocks in a given day, making twice as much progress as required in a given day, or making a day’s worth of progress by accessing the online courses from home. Multiple programs reported that their ability to be flexible was successful in reducing dropout rates.

**Recruiting diverse staff and presenting diverse perspectives.** Some sites reported that students’ academic and socio-emotional outcomes were improved by having staff from diverse cultural, racial/ethnic, and economic backgrounds, and by having those aspects of diversity reflected in the course materials presented to students. For example, one teacher explained:

*We spent one day on race, one day on gender, one day on sexual identity, and then we had one day to wrap things up, and we held an event like a conference. The kids got a name tag when they came in, they got a program, and they had sessions they could choose from—some run by our staff and some run by outside visitors and professors from different places. We had a really nice assortment of visitors come in to do this. …It engaged [the students] in a different way. The students were really, really engaged that week.*

**Pursuing students’ interests.** Several sites created assignments and experiences tailored to students’ interests. For example, one site offered three “interdisciplinary weeks” when regular classes stopped and students focused on topics of particular interest to them. Learning formats for these weeks included seminars, guest speakers, volunteer opportunities, and video screenings, with related assignments. Also, the student internships described below were selected, when possible, based on students’ interests.

**Exploring careers.** One school that implemented freshman transition seminars using the Career Choices curriculum tailored it creatively to their school’s “career academy” structure. Teachers representing each of the academies taught a portion of the career curriculum as a way to introduce all 9th graders to each academy’s offerings. Students’ performance in the seminar then became part of the rankings that determined whether they would gain admission to the academy of their choice if it was oversubscribed.

In another district, seniors took a career skills course and then completed unpaid but credit-bearing internships with local public, private, and non-profit organizations. They were dismissed for the final two periods of each school day, but could complete the internship whenever worked best for the internship site, with an expectation of about 8 hours per week and a 200-hour internship. School personnel selected students who were on track to graduate but had a low GPA, because they had frequently observed students with these characteristics becoming disengaged during their senior year. Successes included developing professional skills and increased levels of professionalism. Challenges included monitoring students’ participation adequately, preparing mentors to provide strong mentorship, and finding students who were willing to commit to and follow through on the program’s requirements. The district addressed these challenges by instituting a weekly check-in with each student and limiting the scale of the program to better match the resources available for selecting and supporting participants.

**Providing online courses.** Several schools offered online courses for students to recover courses or units that they had failed. One school used courses developed by an external vendor, and three developed their own courses using the Moodle course management system. The courses were popular with many students because of the emphasis on self-pacing rather than seat time, the ability to revisit lessons and take assessments multiple times, and being able to test out of units where the content had already been mastered. Common challenges were that some teachers refused to teach online courses, some teachers lacked the time or skills to develop and maintain online courses, and some students wanted or needed direct instruction from teachers. Schools addressed these obstacles in part by providing professional development in the use of Moodle or online courses provided by outside vendors. In addition, school personnel became more accepting of online courses as they gained greater experience with them. Keeping the Moodle courses updated was time-intensive, which led one school to stop using online courses and led another school to switch to using online courses provided by an external vendor.

**Using technology.** In addition to the online courses just described, teachers in several programs used technology with students to support academic needs, enhance differentiation, and promote engagement. One site used technology extensively to communicate with parents and to promote the program to the school community. Staff and students at this site designed a program website which they updated daily. Teachers said that the website promoted greater parental involvement, because assignments and student progress were posted regularly. It was also used as a platform for publishing student work, which motivated some students to improve their final products. The program’s Twitter and Facebook accounts were also updated regularly and supported connections among students, families, teachers, and administrators. Another site maintained a blog, and students were encouraged to contribute posts about their experiences in the program.

**Providing transition support.** Some sites implemented programs that were intended to target students in specific grade levels. Recognizing the importance of the alternative pathways programs to many students, some sites broadened their interventions over time to continue services for students who had completed the program (e.g., juniors who had completed a program designed for freshmen and sophomores). Other programs transitioned students to different support resources in the school or community.

**Engaging families.** Some sites emphasized engaging at-risk students’ families to support collaboration on academic and socio-emotional issues. Several sites said that it was important to contact parents and guardians early in the year, and to keep families informed throughout the year using multiple media. They reported contacting parents and guardians by phone, text message, email, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as speaking with them during back-to-school nights and in-school meetings. One site reported that, in response to a survey question, a majority of parents indicated that they preferred to be contacted by text message. In addition, some sites conducted home visits and hosted family events.

**Targeting freshmen.** The programs at several sites were designed to foster success and reduce students dropping out of 9th grade, utilizing many of the academic and socio-emotional support strategies already described. One district identified 9th-grade students who were at high risk of dropping out and offered them the option of attending an alternative high school for a year before joining the traditional high school. The program started with a summer learning experience, after which the students took courses together as a cohort. The school reported that providing socio-emotional support services (e.g., counseling, home visits) was a key to student success.

Personnel from multiple freshman programs noted the importance of collaborating with sending middle schools to identify the most appropriate incoming students, explain selection criteria and expectations for student participation, and clarify any misconceptions about the program. One high school principal monitored middle school students’ performance in core academic courses to plan programs for future students; he also met frequently with other school leaders to gauge the need for services provided through the alternative pathways program.

**Providing independence to programs.** Several sites created programs that functioned within the administrative structure of a larger high school but were given substantial independence. These sites combined many of the promising practices already discussed into a single program. Most were located within the high school building, and one was conducted at a nearby community center. Some of the key elements of these programs were the ability to innovate in relation to discipline policies, class scheduling, staff selection, and staff support. For example, some programs offered incentives for positive behavior, such as opportunities for groups of students to earn field trips by consistently exhibiting appropriate behavior and strong effort in the classroom. Several programs had class schedules that differed from the larger school, to allow for program activities such as group meetings or team teaching. Most programs actively recruited staff who wanted to work in an alternative setting with at-risk youth, and some programs provided additional staff supports such as extra preparation periods.

**Successes and Challenges**

*If you guys expect us to change our lives, you have to have patience.*

– An alternative pathways program student

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.

After multiple years of implementing alternative pathways programs, schools reported that participating students were less likely to drop out of high school and commit disciplinary infractions, and they were more likely to be promoted with their cohort and to graduate. They also formed strong relationships with teachers and developed confidence in their academic abilities.

Successes reported by a smaller number of sites included improving student attendance, forming and strengthening partnerships with community-based organizations, and increasing students’ excitement about learning and desire to connect their learning to their career aspirations.

Several programs reported that an important benefit of the MassGrad award was having the opportunity to experiment. Teachers at many sites tried new approaches to instruction, assessment, classroom management, and outreach. Administrators tried new staffing models and combinations of supports to foster effective program implementation. One district experimented with multiple formats for delivering their alternative pathways program (e.g., school day vs. after-school implementation, online vs. traditional courses, dedicated staff vs. staff shared with the rest of the high school), and ultimately settled on a program structure that was far different from what they originally envisioned but was well suited to the needs of their students.

Student attendance and academic performance were substantial challenges in several alternative pathways programs. Students in some programs were overwhelmed because they had far fewer credits than their peers and needed to do extra work to catch up. These students were less likely to “see the light at the end of the tunnel,” which reduced their motivation and commitment to the program.

Several sites reported a variety of resource constraints, including funding, program capacity, and professional development. Some programs lacked the funding needed to acquire adequate technology and instructional materials, and some lacked the capacity to serve all students who could benefit from services. In addition, new pedagogical strategies at some sites faltered because teachers were not given adequate training or ongoing support and professional development. At one site, for example, eight of the ten teachers trained in an online credit recovery model left the school, the school did not train additional teachers, and the online model was discontinued even though school personnel believed that it would have been effective.

The structure of several alternative pathways programs called for team teaching, which required more preparation and collaboration time from teachers and was logistically difficult to implement. In these programs, staff turnover and/or expansion made it difficult to maintain the pacing, quality, and fidelity of alternative pathways curricula. Teachers with more experience in the program were typically able to implement the curricula with greater depth or breadth, which resulted in differences in students’ experiences and performance from classroom to classroom, or from year to year.

Two sites reported difficulty in recruiting teachers for evening programs, as well as union grievances regarding unequal planning time and class sizes. To address equity concerns, one program increased class sizes. Another program responded to union grievances by demonstrating that the separate school and smaller class sizes were improving disciplinary referrals and course

completion not only in the alternative pathway but also in the main high school.

Negative perceptions of alternative pathways programs persisted at some sites and needed to be managed. These perceptions were sometimes held by staff and/or students outside the program, and sometimes by program participants. Beliefs that program participants were less intelligent, less accountable, or otherwise less than non-program students weighed on program personnel and participants.

To address these concerns, programs used multiple strategies. First, for the students in the program, they conducted activities (e.g., community meetings, service learning projects) to build a sense of positive identity and culture. Second, they communicated with parents and staff from feeder schools to offer a clear understanding of the programs. Third, program administrators and teachers at some schools led professional development activities for school staff who did not work in the program. In these sessions, they eased concerns about the academic rigor of their program by describing their course curricula. They also explained their strategies for engaging and supporting students with significant academic, social, and behavioral challenges.

In response to diverse challenges, programs discussed a variety of next steps to increase student attendance, engagement, and academic performance. They proposed additional academic supports (e.g., online learning materials, an extra help center for days the program didn’t meet), socio-emotional supports (e.g., individual and group therapy, crisis intervention, enrichment activities), wraparound services (e.g., on-site daycare for parenting students, connections with social service agencies), program hours (e.g., after-school and summer), program participants (e.g., at-risk middle school students), program enrichments (e.g., field trips, authentic assessments, opportunities to take college classes, and earning credit for service learning and work-based learning), and professional development for program personnel.

**Spotlight: Edison Academy**

Edison Academy in Brockton enrolls students ages 15–21 who are under-credited or over-aged for their grade level. The district combined several existing alternative programs into a single school that offers after-school and evening classes, traditional and online credit recovery, and credit for service and work-based learning activities. Students may design a work study/internship under the direction of the principal, or seek a work study opportunity with one of the school’s community partners. Edison students learn alongside adult students who are part of the district’s Community Schools Adult Evening Diploma Program. In addition, the school offers courses for English language learners with the support of bilingual teachers. Edison also allows students to take courses offered through other alternative programs in the district, which expands flexibility and opportunity for students to earn their diplomas.

**Spotlight: Boston Day and Evening Academy**

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) is a public charter high school in Roxbury for students who are over-aged for their grade level, have struggled with attendance, or have dropped out and want to return to high school. The school is competency-based, meaning that students are assessed to determine their current level of knowledge, and then take personalized courses to progress at their own pace from that level forward. Due to this structure, the school holds graduation ceremonies every three months, to recognize students whenever they have demonstrated the competencies required for graduation. BDEA also offers summer courses for students who want to accelerate their course completion. In addition to academic courses, students participate in a career readiness course and a career experience based on internships, volunteer work, or employment. Seniors complete a “capstone” independent research project and presentation in an area of personal interest, which includes job shadows and/or interviews with adults outside the school building who are involved with the capstone topic.

**Additional Resources**

Three of the MassGrad Implementation Award districts that offered Alternative Pathways programs—Attleboro, Lowell, and North Adams— were the subjects of in-depth case studies that are available at http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/evalReports.html.

**Footnotes**

1. The five summary briefs will be posted at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/evalReports.html>.

2. For additional lessons learned about credit recovery from the MassGrad Implementation Award programs, see <http://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/student-centered-learning/online-courses-for-credit-recovery-promising-pract>, as well as two additional publications to be posted on [www.nmefoundation.org](http://www.nmefoundation.org) in 2016.

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