**School Climate and Socio-emotional Systems of Support**

**MassGrad Summary Brief**

**June 2016**

## **Introduction**

This brief shares promising practices, successes, and challenges from programs that focused on school climate and socio-emotional systems of support in eight high schools during the 2011–12 through 2014–15 school years. It is one in a series 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.

Schools implementing the Positive School Climate strategy were receiving support to implement programs that helped students at risk of dropping out to identify, understand, and regulate their emotions and interactions with peers and adults. These skills were intended to reduce problematic behavior by teaching students how to interact and communicate positively, and to strengthen their problem solving and decision-making skills. Programs that addressed external social factors, such as family concerns or substance abuse issues, were also included in this category. Most of the programs were targeted to at-risk students, rather than the school’s student population as a whole.

Participating schools described myriad challenges affecting students’ physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being that were addressed by the MassGrad programs. These included social and emotional difficulties, serious mental health issues, crisis, trauma, substance abuse and addiction, low motivation, homelessness, disabilities and other special needs, academic problems, chronic truancy, gang involvement, pregnancy, and parenting.

**Promising Practices**

The school climate and socio-emotional systems of support programs varied widely in terms of strategies, scope, and participants. Many of the programs had common elements, but they did 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.

**Expanding counseling services.** Some sites added one or more counselors dedicated to providing services to high-need students. These staff members provided increased capacity to manage caseloads, coordinate services, and provide supports. Two sites said that a significant benefit of improving and expanding counseling services was that students ended up spending more time in class, because the counseling services allowed students the opportunity to efficiently “resolve an issue, air out a problem, and get back to class.”Some sites also made staff available to address acute student issues and concerns, such as a drug relapse or family trauma.

**Hiring a support services coordinator.** One school added a new staff member dedicated to monitoring and serving students identified as being at risk of dropping out. This staff member was primarily responsible for monitoring student risk factors, connecting students to appropriate internal and external support services, building partnerships with outside agencies, and providing group counseling.

**Building partnerships with outside support agencies.** Staff at several sites worked to establish and/or maintain partnerships with outside organizations that could provide students with physical and mental health services that were not available at the school. One site organized an event to bring together all of their outside partners to discuss ways to work more collaboratively and effectively. One school partnered with a community-based organization to create an alternative education setting that strived to provide students with a comprehensive and highly personalized system of supports (e.g., social, emotional, physical, academic and legal).

**Offering enrichment opportunities.** Multiple schools provided enrichment activities that were intended to provide opportunities for physical, academic, and socio-emotional growth. Enrichment activities included tutoring, a homework club, sports, career exploration (e.g., courses in fashion design and culinary arts), and courses in time management, study skills, and career skills.

**Facilitating access to social services.** A few sites provided services and resources that were beyond the school’s traditional role. These included helping students and their families obtain support related to childcare, immigrant issues, food stamps, housing, peer conflict resolution, and family mediation. One respondent said, “The way I think about it is offering them everything that I would want for my own child.” One site organized a “social work clinic” one day per week which provided students with an opportunity to receive assistance with a variety of issues for which they would otherwise need to miss school (e.g., signing up for health insurance, arranging medical appointments, and managing immigration issues).

**Building strong connections with students.**Many program staff members noted that building strong relationships with students was a key program goal that required consistent effort and was often an important first step in identifying their specific needs and connecting them with appropriate support services. School staff utilized a mix of formal individual and group counseling techniques and informal relationship-building techniques. The coordinator of one program said, “Although we talk about advanced theory, advanced systems, and partnerships … when it comes down to it, on a simple day to day basis, what works is being relentless about a relationship with a student and doing it over and over and over again with as many students as you can.”

**Communicating with families.** Several sites said that communicating with families was a key strategy for supporting students’ socio-emotional well-being and academic success. Strategies included home visits, phone calls, progress reports, face-to-face meetings, text messages, and emails with students’ families. These communications were intended to provide families with the information they needed to motivate and support their children. Two sites said that they hosted monthly or bi-monthly dinners at their schools for students and parents involved in program activities. Dinner activities were paired with presentations on issues relevant to students’ socio-emotional needs. At both sites, participation in these events exceeded expectations, and families appreciated the staff’s effort to build relationships and support structures for their students.

**Creating a safe space.** Several sites attempted to create a space where students could go to find relief from school pressures, receive support if they were in crisis or having a difficult day, and work with a core set of teachers and counselors with whom they had comfortable relationships. Most programs had a separate space in the school building for this purpose. One site tried to create a greater feeling of safety by referring students with behavioral challenges to meet with a counselor first, before referring them to a school administrator; the site found that this strategy also reduced behavioral challenges and discipline referrals. One staff member said, “This program is seen as a safe place where, if something does get a little out of control, we are equipped to handle it … And I think young people feel safe when they know that the adults have their backs … and that we’re not going to pass judgment.

**Providing mentorship from older students.** Some sites asked students who had previously participated in their programs to help with program orientation and to serve as mentors for current students during small-group discussion sessions. One teacher said, “We’ve been able to form groups with freshman and sophomores, and we put the sophomores in mentoring roles … Obviously, [freshmen] are more likely to take advice from a sophomore than from me, when the sophomore says, ‘Hey that’s a bad idea, that’s the path I was going down last year, and I didn’t like it.” And then they are connected to someone else in the building, too.’”

**Providing transitional and continuing supports.** Several programs designed transitional supports for students who were ending their participation in a support group, activity, or program. These programs monitored the progress of former participants by speaking with their teachers, checking their grades and attendance, and speaking frequently with the students themselves about their progress and concerns. The programs also provided opportunities such as family nights and open program activities that enabled former participants to stay connected. One program coordinator said, “Some students really struggle with the transition, because the level of support available to them in the general student population is far lower [than in the program]. Students leave a cohesive, highly-monitored peer group behind and join larger classes. Some of these students are more vulnerable to bullying, teasing, and classroom conflict.”

**Providing exit counseling.** One site implemented a process to counsel students who were being forced to withdraw from a term due to excessive absences. In the past, exit counseling had been informal and sometimes did not happen at all. The new process was formal, with specific staff members being given clear protocols to follow. Exit counselors ensured that students left with an educational plan, and staff were required to call home to make sure that parents and guardians were involved in the process. The results of the exit counseling process were then reported to the school’s student support team.

**Implementing incentive plans.** One site instituted incentive plans to promote positive behavior and attendance. Students received tickets for each day that they were in school, and some earned extra tickets for positive behavior. A live or silent auction was held at the end of each term, and students redeemed their tickets by bidding on prizes. This incentive plan was first tried with a small group of high-risk students, and, after receiving promising feedback and results, was then implemented with the full student body.

**Implementing restorative justice practices.** One site resolved disciplinary issues using restorative justice practices, an approach that focuses on the needs of the victim and the offender rather than focusing solely on punishment. With the help of a facilitator, victims shared how an offense had affected them, and offenders were encouraged to take responsibility for the impact of their actions on the victim. The victim and offender then decided together what could be done to resolve the situation and how the offender could make restitution.

**Providing professional development.** Some sites provided staff with professional development on topics such as counseling, restorative justice practices, and student behavior management.Another topic was how to build relationships with students while maintaining appropriate boundaries. One site found it useful to discuss when, where, and how it is appropriate to contact students; what the limits of conversations should be; and how that differs for students who are 18 years old and can consent to services without approval of a parent or guardian.

**Forming a student engagement team.** One site formed a student engagement team that oversaw several socio-emotional support activities. Two full-time staff were assigned to coordinate and facilitate the student engagement efforts, and they became the hub for information about all student support programs in the school. They also organized events (e.g., a bullying awareness day), sought student input on possible activities and clubs, and took on the responsibilities of the attendance coach, including home visits when needed.

**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. Several sites reported successes for program participants that included improved attendance, MCAS performance, course passing rates, promotion rates, annual dropout rates, and student engagement, as well as reductions in discipline and behavior referrals. Some sites said that the impacts of their work went beyond just program participants, affecting students in the rest of the school too. Two sites reported that program students were participating in elective courses and extracurricular school activities, in part because their academic success reduced their need to repeat core courses and made them eligible to participate in athletics.

Successes reported by multiple sites included improved collaboration with community-based service providers, a higher quality of student support services, and increased flexibility and understanding from school staff who were external to the program. A few sites reported that nearly all students who completed the program had transitioned successfully into the larger student population with little need for follow-up support. Several sites reported that a strong sense of community had developed among staff members and between staff members and students, resulting in increased student confidence and improved academic performance. One staff member said, “I think that the student-teacher relationship is still the biggest asset that we have… kids really connect with their teachers.”

A challenge across all sites was meeting the high demand for student services and tailoring services to students who needed a high level of one-on-one attention. Student attendance was also a challenge, because some students were absent too often to form meaningful connections with program staff, and that limited the program’s ability to provide effective supports.

Several sites reported that it was difficult to manage the extensive communication and coordination that was needed among students, counselors, school administrators, and other partners. In addition, most sites had experienced only minimal turnover of program staff, but sites that did experience turnover said that it was typically detrimental to the program and impeded the process of establishing trust with students.

A few sites attributed challenges to being a small program within a larger school setting. One site reported that biases from staff and students outside the program resulted in negative labeling and an increased sense of social isolation for some program students. Another site reported that a school staff member from outside the program was dismissive and condescending to a student whom he discovered had been a program participant.

**Spotlight #1: Malden High School**

The Graduation Promotion Success (GPS) program at Malden High School included interventions based on three MassGrad strategies—adult advocates for student success, service and work-based learning, and positive school climate and socio-emotional systems of support. Central to this work was hiring a full-time social worker to coordinate the programs and deliver direct services. Student participants were identified using an early warning index indicator or by referral from a school staff member.

Socio-emotional support interventions included individual and group counseling, less formal “touch base meetings,” monthly parent meetings, a mentoring program, a success course, and referring students to out-of-school services. The success course was offered to students who were repeating 9th grade and focused on understanding and regulating emotions, making sensible decisions, and learning important skills for college and career readiness. The mentoring program connected students with faculty and staff mentors who attempted to meet with students at least twice per week to discuss goals, progress, and strategies for addressing academic and personal challenges. In addition, multiple community partners collaborated with Malden High School in running group therapy, career and service-learning workshops and teen health seminars.

Program successes included enthusiastic staff involvement in the mentoring program as well as strong support from administrators and teachers. This enabled staff members to offer urgent socio-emotional interventions, even if doing so required pulling students out of academic classes. Challenges included “way too many needs and too little resources.” The program reported that many participants were promoted to higher grades and graduated from high school despite being at high risk for dropping out. In addition, the coordinator’s role was absorbed into the school budget after MassGrad funding ended, because the district considered it important and wanted it to continue.

**Spotlight #2: Lowell High School Alternative Diploma Program**

The Alternative Diploma Program (ADP) in Lowell placed great emphasis on building a positive school climate. Targeting youth at the highest risk of dropping out of high school, the program was implemented through a partnership with the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), a community-based organization focused on youth development. In addition to teachers and a director, the program hired transitional coaches to provide intensive student case management, including facilitating connections to internal and external social services. All staff participated in a 40-hour youth development certification program through which they received training in adolescent development, gender and cultural sensitivity, and building leadership skills in youth.

ADP staff were committed to fostering independence, confidence, and respect by engaging students in decisions that affected their own learning experiences and their school. 1uring optional but well-attended weekly “talking circles,” students and staff shared stories and expressed feelings about topics such as the struggles of being a young parent. Staff reported that the talking circles helped students feel supported, boosted their courage to take responsibility for their actions, and built their capacity to make better decisions. The Community Council met every two weeks, with students taking substantial leadership roles, to plan school events, propose changes to school policies, and publicly recognize student accomplishments. Relationships and school climate were also strengthened by using restorative justice practices to address discipline issues, and by outdoor trips that students and staff took together through a partnership with the Appalachian Mountain Club.

**Footnote**

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

**Acknowledgments**

The contents of this report were developed by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute in collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. We thank the following Implementation Award schools with positive school climate and socio-emotional systems of support programs that participated in the MassGrad evaluation: Attleboro High School, Boston Day and Evening Academy, Charlestown High School (Boston), Community Academy of Science and Health (Boston), Lowell High School, Malden High School, Phoenix Charter Academy (Chelsea), and Whitman-Hanson Regional High School.

Grant funding was provided by the U.S. Department of Education. The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and readers should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



