## **Service-Learning and Work-Based Learning**

## **MassGrad Summary Brief**

## **May 2016**

## **Introduction**

This brief shares promising practices, successes, and challenges from the service-learning and work-based learning programs implemented in 12 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.

In its MassGrad Implementation award materials, ESE described service-learning as a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning. Through service-learning, students build skills such as entrepreneurship, leadership, and teamwork as they work with adults in the school, community partners, and local businesses to discover needs and problems in their communities and identify and implement solutions to address them. Work-based learning extends learning from the classroom into the workplace, connecting acquired knowledge with future employment. Through summer jobs, internships, or part-time employment, students are linked to opportunities for applied learning, with guidance from school personnel.

The two primary types of programs implemented in MassGrad sites were:

1. *Education and training.* The schools provided students with opportunities to learn job-related skills (e.g., interviewing, writing a resume, dressing professionally) or introduced students to career and vocational technical education options through workshops, lectures, or semester-long courses. These programs served students in all high school grade levels.
2. *Field experiences.* Students who completed service-learning projects had identified a community concern, worked in teams to find solutions, and gained academic credit. Learning personal skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and communication was a goal of service-learning projects. Work-based learning supplemented traditional academic coursework with experiences outside the classroom setting. Learning employability skills such as being on time, dressing appropriately, and working with others was a goal of work-based learning experiences. Most students received credit, pay, or both. These programs primarily served high school juniors, seniors, and others of working age.

Many sites used both program models, providing education and training that complemented students’ field experiences. The education and training activities were designed as preparation for entering field settings, for students who were already engaged in field experiences, or both.

Service-learning and work-based learning programs may require substantial school investment of personnel and transportation resources, as well as innovations in scheduling, curriculum, assessment, staffing, and logistics. A school may choose to award elective credit for service- and work-based learning activities that take place entirely outside of school time, with minimal staff support and student-provided transportation. However, a higher level of commitment is required if schools want to include students who need strong supports and address the many challenges associated with this complex strategy, as described throughout the summary brief.

**Promising Practices**

The service- and work-based learning 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 other programs were made available to all students. 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.

**Teaching career skills.** Most sites provided career skills education designed to prepare students for service and work-based learning activities outside of the school. Targeted skills included resume writing, time management, teamwork, and norms for speaking with co-workers and supervisors. One site reported teaching skills related to online work, including creating and/or managing appropriate social media profiles, managing passwords and online information, and writing emails that are appropriate for professional communications. Another site had students engage in frequent teamwork activities with their peers, because, according to the program coordinator, “If they can’t get along with each other, then they won’t be able to get along in work.” Some sites contracted with outside vendors or partnered with community organizations to provide these programs. Some sites also invited local employers into the school to talk with students about interviewing skills, how to complete job applications, and what employers look for in applicants.

**Exploring student interests.** Most sites attempted to help students explore their interests and select work-based learning placements based on each student’s interests. One school reported using the Career Interest Survey to help students identify their interests as part of the internship selection process. Another school launched an internship program in which students participated in a course during first trimester that guided them in determining the type of internship that best met their interests. Then the coordinator worked with students and local organizations to find placements during the next one or two trimesters. One student who completed her internship at an animal hospital subsequently obtained a paid internship with the same employer, applied to a veterinary technician college program, and was accepted. Students also worked in child care facilities, a courthouse, and other locations.

**Creating flexible schedules.** Scheduling constraints at many schools required creativity and flexibility in order to accommodate work-based learning activities. Strategies included dismissing students early, starting the school day late, having students participate in their placements after school, or devoting a specific day each week to work-based learning activities with no scheduled class meetings. For example, students at one site took three academic courses in the morning, then an internship support course, and then were transported to community placements that typically took place from 12:30–2:30pm, to coincide with the school schedule. Students at another site did their academic coursework Monday through Thursday from 2:30–8:30pm, and their work-based learning activities took place in the morning and early afternoon from Monday through Thursday, and all day on Friday. As further discussed in the spotlight section about Pittsfield, two high schools in one district offered work-based learning as a formal graduation pathway, and their students could leave school up to three periods before the end of the day to participate in their work placements. A final site released seniors for the last two hours of the day in order to fulfill a 200-hour internship commitment.

**Determining eligibility for work-based learning.** Some sites required students to attain specified levels of attendance and/or academic performance before they were allowed to participate in work-based learning activities. One site applied the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association eligibility guidelines to their internship programs, so that students whose grades would disqualify them from athletic participation were also disqualified from internships. This school’s enrollment in internships was reduced by half when this rule was established.

School personnel shared perspectives both for and against this approach. In favor of these policies, school personnel argued that students shouldn’t participate in optional internships when they are not making adequate progress toward passing core academic courses that are required for graduation. They also expressed concern that students with poor attendance at their internships would damage relationships with host sites, thereby undermining the internship program and reducing prospects for future students. On the opposite side of the argument, some school personnel noted that internships can make the high school experience more engaging and meaningful to students, thereby motivating them to improve their academic grades and attendance. From that perspective, making internship participation contingent on grades and attendance could work against a student’s progress toward graduation.

**Using work-based learning as an incentive.** One work-based learning coordinator used internships to motivate students to do academic work. She reported saying to a student, “If I can get you into the [internship you really want], can you then, during the time you’re in school, really do the work that’s needed to graduate?” She added, “The student made the commitment and kept his word, because he was so excited to be able to do what he really loved. He didn’t want to write the paragraph he needed to write for a class, but he would do it. School didn’t seem as much like a waste of time.”

**Transitioning from in-district to community placements.** Before students at one site were allowed to pursue a placement in the community, they were first required to successfully complete a three-week, in-district placement that provided an opportunity to demonstrate a positive attitude, strong work ethic, strong attendance, and responsible behavior. In-district placements included supporting elementary school teachers and librarians, as well as working in greenhouse run by the school district that sells plants to the public. Another school had students begin their placements with a time commitment of one day per week for two to three hours. Students were then allowed to increase their hours depending on their performance and the willingness of the community partner.

**Recruiting sites.** School personnel used multiple strategies to recruit work-based learning sites, which several schools described as challenging. One school reached out to large employers in targeted industries such as health, financial, culinary, and communications. Other schools worked with external partners such as local employer groups or chambers of commerce. Cold calling local employers and using personal networks were also common strategies.

Two schools also reported holding events to recruit and engage with prospective and current internship hosts. One school had invited 60 local employers to an upcoming event designed to promote greater engagement between the employers and the school while identifying potential internship sites and mentors. Another school described an upcoming luncheon for current site supervisors, community members, and potential partners. The school planned to showcase the work-based learning program, and students were scheduled to give brief presentations about their past internship experiences.

**Providing supportive, structured mentoring.** One interviewee spoke at length about the devotion of internship mentors who have “gone out of their way to create important learning experiences for the students.” These experiences included:

* A farmer who sent a student into the pig pen and gave her a list of questions to be able to answer about every pig, because “you have to know your animals.”
* A mentor at a bike repair shop who taught the student a bike repair skill or customer service skill every day of the internship.
* A student at a university food services department who was given the opportunity to learn a new skill each day—“one day manning the salad bar, one day working the breakfast grill making eggs, another day cutting potatoes. And these guys are really going out of their way to make good experiences for the students.”

Another interviewee described an auto mechanic who quickly increased the hours of a highly-motivated student from 2–3 hours per week to three afternoons per week. This mentor also supported the school in promoting the student’s graduation, saying, “We’ll hire you [as a regular employee] once you get your high school diploma, but not before then.”

**Providing socio-emotional support.** One internship coordinator shared how social emotional competencies taught within the school’s career education curriculum provided support for a reluctant student. The student kept changing her mind about her internship interests, and the coordinator sensed that the student was afraid to work in a field setting. The coordinator found an internship for the student that she took her to “kicking and screaming.” They spent some time processing the experience in light of the social emotional competencies, and the student went on to enjoy the internship. The internship coordinator reported that her knowledge of the student enabled her to select an appropriate internship. Multiple sites reported that having an internship coordinator within the school who knew the students well was important for providing socio-emotional support and understanding students’ interests.

**Using the Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan.** Several sites used the Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan (WBLP) to organize and manage information from student placements. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education describes the WBLP as “a diagnostic, goal-setting, and assessment tool designed to drive learning and productivity on the job.”2 One site reported using the online version of the WBLP to have students write a job description and rate their own performance, to have supervisors type in tasks for each job and rate students at the beginning and end of the placement, and to enable school supervisors to teach mini-lessons on the required job skills. The students researched and wrote their job descriptions with support from the O\*NET Online employment website, a career exploration and job analysis resource.

**Service-learning.** Although service-learning and work-based learning at MassGrad sites overlapped to some extent, service-learning activities tended to be more time-limited, easier to arrange with community partners, and more oriented towards groups of students rather than individual students. One small, alternative school closely integrated service-learning into the school’s academic learning activities for all students and required students to complete service-learning projects before they began work-based learning placements. That program, the E3 Academy in North Adams, is described in a spotlight section.

Service-learning opportunities generally required fewer resources to establish and sustain than work-based learning opportunities. While significant attention from school personnel was required to establish both types of opportunities, schools that have limited personnel capacity or logistical support (e.g., transportation) may prefer to focus on service-learning opportunities. However, schools that have the resources to devote to creating and sustaining effective work-based learning opportunities may prefer their typically longer duration, close association with student interests, and potentially deeper level of learning.

**Offering CNA training.** One school developed a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program. Throughout the school year, students attended a class taught by a nursing instructor from a local college. During the second half of the year, the instructor arranged clinical placements at local hospitals. Students who completed their clinical placement could take exams to become certified CNAs. The program was biology-intensive, and some students who had previously failed their state science exam required for graduation passed it after taking the CNA course. Many of the participants were 22 or 23 years old and had aged out of the secondary education system, so they received their diploma through an adult education program. For the many participants who were English language learners and struggled with the curriculum’s extensive English-language materials, the school offered a peer tutoring program.

**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. The most commonly cited reason for student success was when service-learning and work-based learning placements were engaging and motivating for the students and could connect back to their academic coursework. One program coordinator said, “These are typically kids who haven’t been engaged with academic work, and it makes them more excited about coming to school.” Regarding a student with chronic absences, one interviewee said, “His attendance has improved dramatically—he comes every day—and part of that is that he knows he’s working toward having an internship.”

Program personnel also reported that students were proud of their work in the school and in the community, they were continuing their work-based learning activities even after fulfilling school requirements, they felt that their experiences had made school more relevant, and they had improved their grades and attendance. Other benefits included earning money, “avoiding the ‘summer slide’” by being involved in productive summer employment, clarifying their professional interests, and being hired by their work sites for longer-term positions. One teacher said that for students who have had “really bad role models in the work ethic department,” work-based learning provides “an opportunity to see people working actively, to be one of those people working actively, and to find out that you feel good at the end of three hours of doing something useful.”

Work-based learning activities outside of school also influenced the culture in the school building. Some students began to value the career skills they had gained, wanting to act professionally in school and wanting other students to do the same. Some of the work-based learning programs developed positive reputations in the school, leading additional students to request the opportunity to participate. In one program, graduates returned to speak to current students, some noting that their internship was the highlight of their high school experience.

Compared to the other MassGrad Implementation Award strategies, service-learning and work-based learning programs at many sites took longer to establish and were more often scaled back in scope from the school’s original proposal. This was due to a variety of challenges related to scheduling, transportation, staffing, administrative support, and developing student placements. The site that already had an established work-based learning program prior to MassGrad appeared to experience less of a mismatch between program scope and resources, which suggests that experience with service-learning and work-based learning placements, or strong support in creating a program with a realistic scope, could be a factor in initial program success.

Transportation to internships sites was a common challenge. Depending on the school, strategies included using public transportation, having school personnel transport students, having students or parents take responsibility for transportation, or hiring a private transportation service. One teacher linked transportation challenges to administrative support more generally. Frustrated with the district’s delays in developing an appropriate travel release form, she said, “For something to be created, you need a system supporting that, and this system isn’t even aware of what we’re doing. So we don’t have enough district support to create an effective program as quickly as it needs to be created.”

Securing enough quality work-based learning sites was difficult for several schools. One rural school reported the lack of local employers as an obstacle. The coordinator of another program emphasized that the need for a mentor at the host site led some potential sites to see it as an imposition. When she approaches some potential mentors they “look at [her] like, ‘Are you serious? Like I really need another thing to do?’” Legal issues and competition with other internship programs in the same area can also make it difficult to obtain certain types of internships. One of the schools with a more established work-based learning program reported that much of the “low hanging fruit” in terms of available work-based learning sites had already been picked, leading to a greater level of challenge in identifying new opportunities. Another challenge at some sites was the quality and quantity of work available to students. Some students reported not being given enough meaningful work, receiving only repetitive, low-level tasks, or having the site run out of tasks for them to do.

A lack of workplace readiness skills presented challenges for some students and sites. These skills included arriving on time, calling in to report an absence, being absent too often, following directions, asking for work when idle, or behaving appropriately for a professional setting. Some students also became dissatisfied with their internships quickly and wanted to leave prematurely. Some schools offered classes on workplace skills, and some students learned these skills as part of their work-based learning experiences. Solutions to some of these challenges included requiring minimum levels of attendance in order to keep an internship as well as helping students address problems at their placements, adopt more realistic expectations for their placements, terminate placements appropriately, and transition to new ones.

Several sites noted that it was more difficult to identify appropriate placements for students who were developing basic English language skills. One site was working with community partners to place English language learners at sites where they could use both their native language and English (e.g., local ethnic markets). Another site worked with a local workforce development organization to identify possible placements for English language learners.

**Spotlight: Pittsfield and Taconic High Schools**

Pittsfield High School and Taconic High School, located in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, offer three graduation pathways: arts and sciences, vocational, and work-based learning. In the work-based learning pathway, students receive both credit and pay for work placements that they identify either themselves or with support from the schools’ work-based learning coordinator. They must spend at least fifteen hours per week at their placements. Participating students leave school up to three periods early, although their placements do not need to take place during school hours. Learning academic skills is not a required part of the placement. The schools want students to learn workplace skills such as dressing appropriately, showing up on time, and working cooperatively, among others, and they believe that students can do that at any paid job.

Students take a full academic course schedule until they have a placement, and then they transition into the alternative schedule. During the 2013–14 school year, the schools began requiring students to be passing at least five out of seven courses at the end of a quarter to be eligible for work-based learning placements the following quarter. This was in response to some students who had been succeeding in their placements but falling short of the credits needed for graduation.

The work-based learning graduation pathway existed prior to MassGrad, but MassGrad funds enabled supports such as bus passes and the creation of new marketing tools such as brochures for employer engagement. Previously, students had been required to arrange their own transportation, which had been a barrier to the program’s success. The MassGrad award also supported teacher stipends that permitted the program to continue during eight weeks of the summer. Some students who were in the vocational pathway but did not receive their desired vocational placement transitioned to the work-based learning pathway. School staff said that being able to get credit and pay for participating in authentic work settings prevented some students from dropping out of high school. They also reported that students’ attendance and grades improved while they were doing work-based learning.

**Spotlight: E3 Academy**

E3 Academy in North Adams, Massachusetts, is part of the North Adams public school district. It is a small, alternative program that serves over-aged, under-credited students who are at very high risk for dropout. Students participate in extensive service-learning projects, both to deepen their academic learning and to practice workplace skills in the comparatively sheltered environment of their program before engaging in more in-depth internships. These projects also give teachers the opportunity to assess the students’ readiness for internships in more authentic work environments.

During one trimester, the program’s academic work across multiple disciplines was focused on a local river. The program worked with a local non-profit that is focused on river conservation and revitalization activities, and together they built a trail along the river. The teacher reported that the work was physically demanding, and that the students were excited at first but became less so after a few weeks. The local department of public works removed multiple dump-truck loads of invasive plants that the students had spent days pulling out of the river, and the students were excited to see the large machinery needed to support their efforts. The experience ended with a community celebration that was attended by the mayor and reported in the local press.

The program coordinator said the students learned that perseverance results in success and rewards, and that the service-learning activities helped students to develop a stronger work ethic, see the higher purposes of work, and understand that they are capable of filling community needs. She also said that doing the service-learning projects “engages the kids, makes the learning feel more meaningful, and helps them engage with their peers in a much more productive, positive way than they typically have in the past—so they’re more excited about coming to school.” More detailed information about E3 Academy’s service-learning and work-based learning activities is available in a case study of the programs in North Adams that were funded through their MassGrad Implementation Award.

**Footnotes**

1. The five summary briefs will be accessible through a subpage of <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr>.
2. MassGrad Implementation Awards case study: Drury High School, North Adams, Massachusetts. (2015). Hadley, MA: University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/CaseStudy-NorthAdams.pdf>
3. <http://www.skillslibrary.com/wbl.htm>.

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