

MassGrad Implementation Awards Case Study



School Within a School at Attleboro High School, Attleboro, Massachusetts

Introduction

This case study highlights the School Within a School (SWS) program at Attleboro High School, a comprehensive high school with a school year 2013–14 enrollment of 1,688 and an entering freshman class of 433. The school serves a city of 43,000 residents on the south shore of Massachusetts. The main purpose of this case study is to support school personnel throughout Massachusetts who plan to conduct or are already conducting similar programs.

Through the Implementation Awards program of the MassGrad initiative, Attleboro’s SWS received an award of \$475,000 to be used during the 2010–11 through 2014–15 school years. The MassGrad initiative targeted the 133 schools from 76 districts that exceeded the statewide annual dropout rate of 2.9% during the 2008–09 school year. Twenty-eight of the MassGrad high schools in 17 districts received Implementation Awards through a competitive application process.

Attleboro High School was selected as a case study site by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) in part due to improvement in its dropout and graduation rates during the first two years of the MassGrad award. This improvement was sustained through the third year of the award. Specifically, from the 2010–11 school year through the 2013–14 school year, the school’s annual dropout rate decreased from 2.1% to 1.6%, and its 4-year graduation rate increased from 83.5% to 86.6%.

MassGrad Implementation awardees could select up to three out of seven dropout prevention strategies that ESE specified as “evidence based.” The three strategies that Attleboro High School selected to

implement through the SWS are described briefly below, and then in greater detail in the following pages.

1. Alternative pathways to meet a range of student needs – SWS is an alternative pathway for many of Attleboro’s at-risk 9th- and 10th-grade students. The program serves a maximum of 48 students per year and is located at Attleboro High School. Students complete their core academic course requirements in the smaller learning environment provided by SWS, and they complete many of their electives with the general student population.

2. Positive school climate and socio-emotional systems of support – SWS staff members are committed to providing a positive, supportive learning environment. In support of that goal, the program fosters strong relationships between students, staff, parents, school and district administrators, and Attleboro social service agencies.

3. Work-based learning – SWS staff members work with the school’s Career and Technical Education (CTE) department as well as the Attleboro Area School-to-Career Partnership (AASTCP), a community-based organization that facilitates work-based learning and job readiness training activities. All SWS students have opportunities to explore their career aptitudes and interests, and qualified students also participate in work experiences in a supportive environment.

Overview

SWS is a small learning community within Attleboro High School for incoming 9th-grade students who have previously struggled in school to help them make a successful transition to high school. A small

group of students are invited to continue participating in the program during their sophomore year. The program aims to build strong relationships between students and staff, establish partnerships with families, and enhance classroom experiences by providing supports and curriculum that are tailored to students' needs and preferences. The SWS mission reads, "To empower students to have confidence in their abilities and take ownership of their education by developing the skills necessary to succeed in high school and beyond."

SWS provides five courses per trimester with small class sizes (12:1 student-teacher ratio) and flexible scheduling options. The courses emphasize the use of technology such as iPads and integrate curriculum focused on real-life applications.

Students

SWS administrators use multiple methods to identify potential program participants. First they review attendance and discipline records, MCAS scores, recommendations from middle school counselors, and the state's Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS). Additional students are identified by program staff during district summer programs for rising 9th-graders. Administrators prioritize enrollment of students who have received an MCAS performance level of "warning/failing" or "needs improvement," or who are struggling academically, socially, and/or emotionally. All students who are invited to participate and their parents/guardians (hereafter "parents") are asked to meet with the dean/program coordinator to discuss the program. This practice has been used to increase student buy-in, establish trust, communicate expectations, and improve communication among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Students and parents both sign a contract, and parents are asked to attend meetings approximately every two months with the teachers and the dean.

The program serves approximately 36 freshmen and 12 sophomores each year. As students complete their freshman year, program staff review each student's progress, accomplishments, and needs to determine which students will be invited to continue in the SWS program as sophomores. While 35–45% of participants have an Individualized Education Program, SWS is not a special education program. Rather, it is an inclusion program that aims to ease students' transition into high school by offering social, emotional, and academic supports to at-risk youth.

Staff

One administrator, four teachers, and one paraprofessional work full time with SWS students. There has been no turnover in key program staff during the four years of the MassGrad award, which all staff members said has contributed to the program's success.

The administrator who manages the day-to-day operations of SWS works with school and district administrators to ensure proper oversight and to facilitate communication among students, parents, school officials, and other local service agencies. He works closely with SWS families that are involved with the court system, and he sometimes attends court to support them. He also helps families connect with community-based counseling services (e.g., Community Counseling of Bristol County). One interviewee said, "Martin [the SWS administrator] works with the students and families, getting parents engaged in school who never were engaged before. He ensures that those parents are accountable for themselves and for their children. He is the familiar face that's always there. He is trying to work to make these students successful."

Each of the teachers volunteered to participate in the program, and they are frequently described as energetic. Each teacher leads courses in one core subject area (i.e., English, history, math, or science). The English and History teachers team teach Humanities (9th grade) and American Studies (10th grade). The math courses offered to SWS participants include Algebra and Geometry, and the science offerings include Conceptual Physics and Earth Science.

One interviewee said, "The SWS teachers are phenomenal. They have the patience of saints. They give students every opportunity to succeed. ... They provide a laid back acceptance that SWS students may not look or act like students in a typical classroom." Another interviewee said, "The teachers are in tune with the kids, they are building relationships, they are keeping the kids moving. They know what to do to engage the kids so that they can be a community of learners."

The program has a full-time paraprofessional who said that one of her primary responsibilities is to provide one-on-one instruction and support to special education students. SWS teachers stressed that this support is critical because a special education teacher is not assigned to SWS. Teachers and administrators

said that she offers informal counseling for students who are “having a rough day,” attends to some administrative duties (such as attendance), manages minor discipline issues, and serves as an integral component of the student support structure offered by the program. One teacher said, “Students tend to open up to the paraprofessional about certain topics because they have more time with her. . . . She is part of the team and the students know her. Speaking with her isn’t as stigmatizing as going to the resource office. Students request to go talk to her.”

Schedule

The school day begins with a morning meeting run by the dean, where individual and group goals are reviewed and any group issues are addressed. The morning meeting occurs during the schools’ regularly scheduled advisory period (i.e., homeroom). These issues might include an upcoming field trip, upcoming opportunities for school engagement (e.g., clubs, events), attendance problems, tensions between students, or a death in a student’s family. Students spend about four hours per day in SWS and about two hours in the larger high school setting. In addition to the core subjects, students participate in Life Skills and Cultural Studies courses for elective credit. The Life Skills course focuses on challenging issues such as improving self-image and resisting peer pressure, and many of its lessons are based on the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. Students also have time during the school day to complete homework or receive a variety of academic or socio-emotional supports.

As freshmen, SWS students are integrated with other Attleboro High School students during health, physical education, and CTE exploratory courses. As sophomores, they enroll in a wider range of electives including art, music, foreign language, physical education, and CTE offerings. One teacher said, “The more that students feel different from their peers, the more resistance there is to the services we provide. We have tried hard to open up the schedule to get students out into elective classes, and also to make sure that they are not all in the same elective classes as each other.”

Another teacher explained that, for sophomores, “We give them more say in what classes they want to stay in SWS for. Some students stay for math and science, but transition out for English and history. If students are strong academically, we give them an opportunity to be successful in the larger school, but we still keep

in touch with them about subjects they feel less comfortable in.”

Alternative Pathways

SWS is embedded in a larger set of support programs that address the needs of at-risk students and students who have already dropped out of high school. The other support programs provided by Attleboro High School include another alternative high school program, after-school and summer academic support programs, an evening diploma program, credit recovery, a school-to-career program, a mentor program, and CTE options. SWS students are eligible to participate in all of these programs.

The features of SWS that distinguish it from the standard school program include:

Program location – SWS classrooms and offices are clustered in a central location at Attleboro High School, which staff said has facilitated frequent communication and expedited management of student concerns. In addition to sharing a common planning time, SWS teachers often meet informally for 15 minutes after school to debrief the day, which they said is an important activity that would likely not occur if their classrooms were scattered around the building. The clustering of SWS classrooms also engenders a sense of community among SWS students.

Small class size – SWS enrollment is capped at 48, which ensures a low student-to-teacher ratio of 12:1. Several staff said that this low ratio was essential to providing SWS students with the academic, social, and emotional supports they need. One teacher commented, “There is no way I could do the job that I do with a full course load of children. Outside of SWS, I have had classes with many difficult students in the past, and it is hard to keep tabs on them all. At some point some kids fall through the cracks, because you only have so many hours in the day.”

Common planning time – SWS teachers share a common planning period that allows them to collaborate on curriculum, discuss student progress, identify student problems before they escalate, and meet as a team with parents. One teacher said, “We meet often. We talk about kids. We share things that we have done. Those are the keys to a program like this. . . . This can be a tough job, and it’s really nice to have people who are in it with you and keep you positive.”

Technology – SWS staff use technology extensively in the classroom to communicate with parents and to promote the program to the school community. Teachers use technology with students to support academic needs, build skills, and promote engagement. In addition, some students take online courses that allow for enhanced differentiation. Staff and students also designed a program website and update it daily. Teachers said that the website promotes greater parental involvement because assignments and student progress are posted regularly. It is also used as a platform for publishing student work, which has motivated some students to improve their final products. The program’s Twitter and Facebook accounts are also updated regularly and have supported connections among students, families, teachers, and administrators.

Additional supports – SWS students benefit from enhanced supports compared to the general student population. The dean has a smaller caseload than other deans at Attleboro High School (who typically serve hundreds of students), which enables him to monitor student progress closely, communicate regularly with parents and support staff, and maintain close connections with school- and community-based programs that serve SWS students. In addition, a single school guidance counselor is assigned to serve all SWS participants. She knows the program and all of its students well, and this knowledge helps her provide more effective supports than if the role was filled by multiple guidance counselors.

Many students transition into Attleboro High School after completing one or two years in SWS. Some take advantage of the school’s CTE pathways, and SWS collaborates with CTE staff to ensure that students have the qualifications required for those opportunities. Special education students who have completed SWS but would continue to benefit from a more supportive environment can transfer to the Network High School program, an alternative high school for special education students with behavioral, social, and emotional concerns. Some students choose to continue their education in an alternative education setting at the Attleboro Evening Diploma Program.

Positive School Climate

The SWS emphasizes the importance of maintaining a positive school climate and robust socio-emotional support systems. Current and former SWS students receive wraparound services from school and community agencies (e.g., Community Counseling of

Bristol County) as needed. SWS staff collaborate frequently with supports within the school (e.g., school adjustment counselors and psychologists, truancy officer, diversion team) and outside the school (e.g., counseling agencies, probation officers, and community support organizations).

The dean acknowledges that his dual roles as administrator and counselor are sometimes at odds. He manages many issues presented by students that might typically be addressed by a school adjustment counselor. However, some students need regular therapeutic interactions or present issues that conflict with the dean’s role as the primary disciplinarian for the program. One way that he addresses this problem is by referring students with ongoing attendance and/or discipline problems to a school adjustment counselor, rather than serving as their counselor himself. These decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. This practice has reduced concerns regarding confidentiality, privacy, and the logistics of running the program. One school administrator said, “Martin is a counselor, but he is also willing to hold kids to a pretty high set of expectations while also being flexible. You have to be able to hear kids’ stories. They have a lot of trauma in their lives. Martin helps students make choices and cope, and move on.”

Program personnel are aware that many SWS students have experienced trauma and have emotional challenges. As a result, staff regularly check in with students by asking questions like, “How are you today?” “Did you sleep well?” “How was the homework?” They reported that students’ emotional needs trump academic concerns when necessary. One teacher said, “If a child comes to school in distress, there are lots of things we can do to help. ... We don’t treat all children the same all of the time. We are good at recognizing that different kids need to access different supports.” The program features a flexible learning environment, so if a student is having a hard day or struggling in a particular area, teachers try to find ways to provide one-on-one support and options for participating in learning activities.

While staff members believe that flexibility is important, they also try to foster a sense of consistency and accountability. One way they do this is by frequently communicating the program’s expectations regarding issues such as respect, attendance, and homework. For example, SWS students, teachers, and administrators collaborated to develop a policy regarding student use of cell phones, and then the teachers and administrators tried to apply the policy consistently. Teachers said that these

types of interactions help students by clarifying behavioral expectations and providing a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Additional factors that staff said contribute to the program's positive climate and effective support systems include building peaceful and trusting relationships among all participants (through ongoing, open, and honest communication); enlisting staff members who are deeply committed to the program; giving students the choice of whether to participate in the program (while also helping them understand why it might be a good match for them); and providing students with flexible learning, assessment, and scheduling options.

Many students participate in an academic support or 8th-to-9th-grade transition program during the summer before entering SWS in 9th grade. The goals of these programs are to help students build relationships, maintain their academic skills over the summer, and form meaningful connections to the high school that will support a smooth transition. An added benefit of these programs is that they enable SWS staff to meet many of the incoming SWS students.

Once school starts, SWS students participate in orientation activities focused on team building, trust, and effective goal setting in order to establish the school's expectation of individual and collective responsibility. Students and parents sign a contract, and parents are required to attend regular meetings with the teachers and program coordinator. Staff work with students and their families to help support the home-school connection through meetings, letters, phone calls, and a home/school contract.

For students who have moved from SWS to join the full student population, the dean works closely with the guidance department to support a smooth transition. SWS staff said that many of these students undergo a challenging period of adjustment, and SWS staff collaborate with the school's guidance department to monitor their academic, social, and emotional well-being. These students continue to receive additional after-school academic, social, and emotional supports, and they are invited to participate in advisories that are run by SWS staff.

Work-based Learning

All SWS freshmen participate in two trimesters of "CTE Exploratory," a course that enables them to sample the CTE programs offered at Attleboro High

School. As sophomores, students can enroll in any of these programs and earn a 3-year CTE certificate in addition to their high school diploma. During the first year of the SWS program, students completed CTE Exploratory as a separate cohort. In subsequent years they were integrated with the full school population, and their disciplinary referrals during CTE exploratory subsequently declined considerably.

In collaboration with the Attleboro Area School-to-Career Partnership, students complete a career portfolio by the end of their freshman year. The AASTCP career counselor works one-on-one with SWS students to support college and career exploration in service of completing their portfolio. In addition, the AASTCP director works with the Attleboro Chamber of Commerce to bring guest speakers into the school and arrange field trips for students to local businesses of interest to them. Guest speakers have included representatives from colleges, technical schools, community organizations, and the military. SWS sophomores meet with the AASTCP counselor to arrange job shadowing opportunities with local organizations related to careers that interest them.

SWS students also participate in a regional Credit for Life fair. The fair facilitates a financial literacy exercise in which high school students role play the position of an adult with a career, salary, credit score, housing expenses, and bills. The goal is for students to have a better understanding of their future fiscal responsibilities.

Successes

Many students transition successfully out of SWS into the standard high school program, and SWS administrators report that there is not a high level of grade retention among former SWS students. The school principal said, "The program is doing what it needs to do, which is assist students with the adjustment to high school and get them prepared." Interviewees also said that SWS has improved the climate of the high school by reducing behavior problems and increasing levels of student engagement. The school principal said that the level of engagement between SWS students and teachers is "remarkable," and the principal has provided structured opportunities for SWS teachers to share their strategies for engaging students with other staff members.

The table on the next page summarizes the recent enrollment status (as of October, 2014) for all SWS

students served in 2011–12, 2012–13, and 2013–14, by cohort. Some students have been served by SWS for multiple years, and are consequently included in more than one cohort. A summary across all cohorts is also included. Of the 42 students who participated in SWS in the 2011–12 school year, 32 (76.2%) are still enrolled in high school. An additional 7 (16.7%) students transferred to another district (1 in state, 4 out of state, and 2 to an adult diploma program). Three students (7.1%) from the original cohort have dropped out. Enrollment, transfer, and dropout rates are also shown for SWS participants from the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years.

SWS teachers said that it has been rewarding to see students experience success in the classroom, and to see parents realize that school can help their children succeed. Staff believed that the strong relationships developed between the program and parents, as well as helping parents become more involved with their children’s education, has been essential to the program’s success.

The dean said, “It’s been a wonderful journey, I must admit, to be able to develop the program with the students and staff. Students who were a part of the first cohort come back to visit the staff all the time. They tell them they were happy to be part of the program and that they are going to graduate this year.”

Challenges

Despite efforts to provide comprehensive academic, social, and emotional support services, staff were disappointed that the program did not meet some students’ needs. A school administrator summed up several staff members’ comments by saying, “We’ve come to the realization that the SWS program is not necessarily the answer to all of the problems that SWS students have.” One particular challenge was influencing students’ home lives, despite extensive outreach efforts. One interviewee said, “We still have

a long way to go in having more of our parents being more open to changing their parenting approaches in order to have an impact on their child’s education.” When the program started, a small group of participants and their parents resisted. Some students resented being selected and felt that they had not been given the option to decline. Some parents did not understand why their child had been selected or how the program could help their child. The dean met with each of these students and their parents to clarify the purpose and benefits of the program. After this conversation, students (and parents) who wanted to leave the program were allowed to do so. Ultimately, nearly all students chose to remain in the program. Efforts to improve communication between students, parents, and program staff—and to initiate conversations about participation earlier—greatly reduced the level of resentment and confusion experienced by students and parents.

The teachers union also expressed initial concern that the program design promoted inequitable class sizes and an inequitable work load (because SWS teachers had an extra prep period during the program’s first year). SWS leaders worked with the teachers union to address these concerns, and over time the union and the school community reportedly came to accept and value the program.

Sustainability

Without additional supports, SWS will not exist in its current format after the 2014–15 school year. However, school administrators said that lessons learned will continue to inform work being done to support students who struggle in the transition to high school. It was not clear if the school would have the capacity to run smaller program with similar goals. Program administrators said that they would like to continue the program as currently implemented, but acknowledged that financial pressures would prevent them from doing so. Beginning in the 2015–16 school year, Attleboro High School plans to provide

Most Recent Enrollment Status of SWS Participants by Cohort			
School Year	Enrolled	Transferred	Dropped Out
2011–12	32 (76.2%)	7 (16.7%)	3 (7.1%)
2012–13	35 (81.4%)	5 (11.6%)	3 (7.0%)
2013–14	42 (91.3%)	2 (4.3%)	2 (4.3%)
Unduplicated Count Across All Years	89 (85.6%)	10 (9.6%)	5 (4.8%)

additional supports to a smaller group of freshmen and sophomore students, but not as participants in the SWS program. SWS teachers will be re-integrated with their previous academic departments, and the SWS dean anticipates taking on a new role that blends counseling and administrative duties. Reflecting upon the SWS experience, the dean said,

For myself, it has been a wonderful learning curve in terms of where we started, trying to meet the needs of these 8th graders. We've made some mistakes along the way, but we have learned from them. We have created a sound model that creates the supports for students to be successful. ... I will miss working with the staff. We've had some fabulous training from ESE, such as being given the opportunity to present at MassGrad and hear presenters in the same situation. The experience has been priceless.

School and district administrators are aware that SWS has improved the school's dropout rate, graduation rate, and freshman retention rate. A district administrator who coordinated the district's MassGrad award programs reported that she is always looking for additional funding, and that the district would like to continue the program if financial resources are available in the future.

For More Information

The following brief publications from the MassGrad Evaluation provide greater detail about two of the strategies described in this case study, as implemented

across all of the MassGrad Implementation Award sites.

1. MassGrad Evaluation Brief – Adult Advocates for Student Support, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/EvalBrief-AdultAdvocates.pdf>
2. MassGrad Evaluation Brief – Credit Recovery, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/EvalBrief-CreditRecovery.pdf>
3. Online Courses for Credit Recovery: Promising Practices for High School Teachers, <http://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/student-centered-learning/online-courses-for-credit-recovery-promising-pract>

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