

MassGrad Implementation Awards Case Study



Alternative Diploma Program of the United Teen Equality Center in Lowell, Massachusetts

Introduction

This case study describes an alternative high school diploma program targeting at-risk youth in Lowell, Massachusetts. The Alternative Diploma Program (ADP) was developed and implemented through a partnership between the Lowell Public Schools and United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), a community-based organization focused on youth development. The case study's main purpose is to support youth organizations and school staff throughout Massachusetts who plan to conduct or are already conducting similar programs.

The Lowell Public Schools received an Implementation award for \$296,876 through the MassGrad initiative of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). The award supported their partnership with UTEC during the 2010–11 through 2014–15 school years. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, 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% during the 2008–09 school year. Twenty-eight of the MassGrad high schools received Implementation Awards through a competitive application process.

MassGrad Implementation awardees could select up to three out of seven dropout prevention strategies that ESE specified as "evidence based." The three strategies selected by the Lowell Public Schools in partnership with UTEC are described briefly below, and then in greater detail in the following pages.

1. Alternative pathways to meet a range of student needs – ADP is the alternative pathway program for Lowell's most at-risk youth. ADP defines this population as students who are at risk of dropping out or have dropped out, and are gang involved, court involved, criminally involved, homeless, or young parents. The program can serve up to 32 students and is housed in the UTEC building. Students complete the course credits they need to graduate in a small learning community that endeavors to tailor curricula to individual student needs.

2. Adult advocates for student support – Each ADP student is assigned a transitional coach who provides intensive wraparound support and services. Transitional coaches work with students to create individual service plans that may include access to healthcare, housing, food, or childcare assistance, as well as advocacy with the law enforcement system.

3. Positive school climate and socio-emotional systems of support – ADP staff are committed to fostering independence, confidence, and respect by engaging participants in decisions that affect their learning community and individual learning experiences. The program uses restorative justice practices to address discipline issues, a council comprised of students and teachers to manage the program and improve the school community, and group discussion activities to foster strong relationships among students, staff, and administrators.

Overview

Lowell is located in north central Massachusetts and is the fourth-largest city in the state, with an estimated 2013 population of almost 110,000

residents. The city’s landscape features many mills along the Merrimack River, reminders of its once thriving manufacturing industry. About half of Lowell’s residents are immigrants or refugees.

In 2014, Lowell High School enrolled 3,034 students in grades 9–12, of whom 66% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, 12% were English language learners, and 10% received special education services. The student population was 32% Asian, 32% White, 24% Hispanic or Latino, 11% African American or Black, and 1% multi-racial.¹

Many of Lowell’s youth face challenges such as poverty, cultural barriers, unemployment, and gang involvement. Cultural barriers include language gaps and generational differences between immigrant and refugee parents and their children. The unemployment rate in Lowell has been consistently two to three percent higher than the state average, causing financial instability.

In 2008, an analysis by the Lowell Public Schools of alternative education options revealed that no program existed to serve Lowell’s most at-risk, high school-aged youth. These youth were characterized as students who were not on track to graduate or had dropped out and were also gang involved, court involved, criminally involved, homeless, or young parents. In order to explore program options, the Lowell Public Schools partnered with UTEC, an organization with a mission “to ignite and nurture the ambition of Lowell’s most disengaged young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success.” The partners designed a program that would provide Lowell’s most at-risk youth with the opportunity to earn their high school diploma in a personalized learning environment that included wraparound social support services while cultivating youth voice, self-advocacy, and accountability.

The Alternative Diploma Program

The Alternative Diploma Program (ADP) was piloted during the 2008–09 school year. During its first two years of implementation, the program served 13 youth in the late afternoons at the high school, with core courses taught by Lowell High School staff. One transitional coach provided intensive student case management, which consisted of monitoring attendance, encouraging students to stay on track academically, and facilitating connections to social services. Receiving the MassGrad Implementation award allowed the program to hire dedicated staff

and expand to a full-day program that could serve up to 32 students at the UTEC building. UTEC hired a full-time program director, 2.5 full-time equivalent teaching faculty, and an additional transitional coach to support the increased number of students. The program also began to offer elective courses and enrichment activities. New student enrollment takes place on a rolling basis from the program’s substantial wait list as spots become available.

ADP SCHOOL DAY	
9:00am	Fresh Inspirations
9:35am	Check-ins
10:05am	Academic Block 1
11:05am	Academic Block 2
12:00pm	Lunch & Common Block
1:00pm	Academic Block 3
2:00pm	Academic Block 4

The program offers a trimester academic calendar and a four-week, intensive summer program. The school day is from 9:00 a.m. to 2:55 p.m. and includes “Fresh Inspirations,” student check-ins, four academic blocks, and a common block. Students participate in Talking Circles, Peace Circles, and Community Council. Each of these program features is described below.

Climate and Culture – UTEC emphasizes youth empowerment, positivity, and peace, which is reflected in ADP’s welcoming environment that exudes a sense of mutual respect between staff and students. The former director of the program referred to this as “setting the vibe for positive impact.” The welcoming environment is apparent from the moment a guest enters the building. The UTEC youth who work at the main desk greet visitors with a genuine smile, eye contact, and a willingness to help.

According to its core values statement, UTEC is a family that assumes goodness behind everyone’s actions. These values form the foundation of the ADP. Staff believe that “every day is a fresh start for our youth, things are not held over students’ heads, and teachers never give up on students.” One staff member shared,

Having a lot of support for and belief in these students is huge. Most youth come to ADP and report that they felt as though they were treated like losers because of the issues they were dealing

with. We attempt to turn that on its head. We stress that the program is a fresh start. We encourage them to think about their future: six months from now, a year, five years from now. Often ADP students come in with no future aspirations because they have been told they don't have a future.

Because of the program's small size, each student receives individual attention and is known well by all staff. According to the former director, "ADP staff act with intention. They see every conversation as an opportunity to build or strengthen their relationships with students. Staff are youth workers first and teachers or administrators second." All ADP staff have participated in the BEST (Building Exemplary Systems of Training Youth Workers) initiative, a 40-hour, nationally recognized youth development certification program. Through BEST, staff were introduced to a common language for discussing youth development. They received training in childhood and adolescent development, youth stereotyping, cultural competency, gender and cultural sensitivity, and related issues. BEST training was also intended to enhance the ability of ADP staff to engage and build leadership in youth.

Youth Voice – Each school day begins with Fresh Inspirations, during which all students and staff participate in team-building activities or respond to the Question of the Day (QOTD). This time provides a supportive atmosphere for students and staff to share their current accomplishments or struggles. The ADP community celebrates successes and provides support in times of struggle.

Weekly Talking Circles, which take place during the common block, offer an opportunity for all students and staff to build relationships with each other. The Talking Circle format provides a safe space for students to share their stories and express their feelings. Staff reported that the activity is optional but well attended, and that students appreciate the honest dialogue with the staff and their peers. Together, staff and students decide on a topic that is relevant and



timely. For example, Talking Circles have focused on working through students' feelings about incidents of gang violence in the city and the struggles of being a young parent. Staff report that Talking Circles help students feel supported, boost their courage to take responsibility for their actions, and build their capacity to make better decisions.

Youth voice plays a significant role in program management. The ADP Community Council meets every two weeks and includes all staff and students. Students develop the meeting agenda and often facilitate the meetings. The Council reviews program policies and can propose changes. All Community Council meetings begin with "Mood Check," during which participants rate their current mood on a scale of one to ten and may also explain their rating. QOTD is next and is designed for each participant to share something about themselves. One example of a QOTD is, "Who do you most admire and why?"

After QOTD, the meeting focuses on ADP business that students and staff have put forth for discussion, such as planning an upcoming ADP Community Day. The meeting ends with SNAPS, during which participants either share something they have done recently and are proud of or recognize others for something they have done. Instead of clapping, participants snap to show their support. To help students practice self-control and listening skills, during all meetings the speaker holds a small Tiki statue to support the rule that only one participant should speak at a time.

Students also participate in hiring teaching staff and AmeriCorps volunteers. They sit in on interviews, ask the candidates questions, and observe them teaching. Students report that they enjoy participating, and one staff member said that "students' questions for the candidates are usually spot on."

ADP Community Council Agenda
• Mood Check
• QOTD
• Council Business & Updates
• SNAPS

Restorative Justice – The program reports minimal disciplinary issues. However, when issues arise, the program is committed to restorative justice, an approach to discipline that focuses on the needs of the victim and the offender rather than focusing solely on punishment. During a “Peace Circle,” the victim(s), offender(s), and facilitator(s) come together to discuss the offense and decide what happens next. Victims take an active role in the process by sharing how the offense affected them. Offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and their impact on the victim. The victim and offender decide together what can be done to resolve the situation and how the offender can make restitution. The director shared,

It takes a lot of courage for a victim or an offender to speak their truth and look someone in the eye. It is not an easy task. It is hard to share how you have been hurt or to take accountability for someone’s hurt. Through the Peace Circle you are face to face, and that can be difficult, but it is transformative and it is powerful.

For example, being a victim of bullying had led a student to stop attending the program. The victim’s transitional coach stayed in contact with her and helped her build confidence to participate in a Peace Circle. It took place offsite in order to demonstrate the severity of the issue to the bullies and to help the victim feel safe. Over the course of two hours, the victim shared how the bullying had made her feel. The bullies were required to maintain eye contact while the victim spoke and were not allowed to discredit her feelings. The bullies were required to take responsibility for their behavior, which they did by the end; they acknowledged that they had acted inappropriately, and they shared that they wished the victim had stood up to them sooner. The director and the transitional coach pointed out a key outcome of the restorative justice approach, which is that the bullies ended up experiencing and demonstrating genuine feelings of regret for their actions. The victim and bullies agreed to put the issue behind them and are now friends.

Teaching and Learning – ADP employs 2.5 full-time equivalent teachers who teach core courses in English, mathematics, and science, as well as a civics course that UTEC requires. Teachers are assisted by AmeriCorps volunteers. Teachers and other ADP staff also deliver other courses as needed. For example, the ADP director offers athletic activities before school to help students meet their physical education requirements, and the science teacher offered an environmental studies elective that involved students

planting and caring for a community garden. While the staff offer these types of creative solutions to meeting course requirements, all agreed that the size of their staff limits their capacity to offer more electives.

ADP teachers have found that an individualized, project-based learning approach is an effective way to address the challenges of student absenteeism, different learning speeds, and skills that are below grade level. With only 5 to 12 students per class, the teacher can work with each student individually to determine his or her strengths and needs. The teacher and student develop a project together that meets course content requirements while also sparking student’s interest in the subject matter.

The teachers said that they try to make learning as hands on and interest based as possible. For example, a student who disliked math but was interested in racism in the prison industry carried out a project that examined the demographics of prisoners in public versus private facilities. The project also explored the concepts of correlation and causation. The history teacher and his students decided that political violence was an interesting lens through which to study the 1960s, so each student became an expert on one event or assassination. One product of their work was a timeline of these events displayed in the UTEC building. Affirming the UTEC faculty’s shared belief that student interests are the key to engagement and performance, one teacher said,

Every student has a different hook—something that hooks them into the program, and something that hooks them into the academics. It is my job to figure out that hook ... I want to learn what that hook is for each of my students.

Individualized, project-based learning also reduced the impact of frequent absences. This is because students working on their own assignments will not have missed specific lessons that need to be made up, which would potentially cause them to fall further behind. UTEC staff acknowledged the tension between accommodating students’ individual needs while maintaining rigor and accountability, and they emphasized that passing grades do require a minimum level of attendance and engagement.

As of summer 2014, all teachers had been trained in competency-based assessment, and two had implemented it in their classes. The teachers explained that competency-based assessment has been easier to implement in some content areas than others. The mathematics teacher shared that “math seems to lend itself more easily than other subjects, I think

because the list of skills is more cut and dry.” The science teacher noted that she used competency-based assessment to review coursework, but she used traditional grading for exams. This was due in part to the fact that teachers must report a numerical course grade for each student to the district, and the school’s approach to competency-based assessment did not lend itself to numerical grades.

Transitional Coaches – ADP employs two full-time transitional coaches who provide intensive case management and wraparound services to an average caseload of 16 students. According to one staff member,

A transitional coach is someone who is knowledgeable about the age range and circumstances of the youth in our program. They are able to support students’ development, and they truly care about students’ well-being and education. They support students inside and outside of school, checking in on them during classes, taking them to court, and taking them to social service or health appointments. Transitional coaches are often the glue holding our students together so they can get through the program.

Transitional coaches reported that they develop strong bonds with their students by interacting with them on a daily basis and checking in with other ADP staff regarding progress and any problems. They attend ADP student support meetings and work closely with teachers to develop strategies to motivate students to improve academically.

Transitional coaches are typically onsite during the program’s morning hours, participating in Fresh Inspirations, checking in with students and staff, and making note of students who are absent. If a student appears particularly frustrated, angry, or disruptive, the transitional coach will take him or her offsite, to a coffee shop for example, for a one-on-one conversation to help the student get back on track. Transitional coaches also contact absent students to ask why they are absent and what the coach can do to help the student come to school that day.

During the afternoons, transitional coaches typically visit students’ homes to observe their living conditions and check in with a parent or guardian. They also take students to court, medical, or other appointments. In the late afternoons the coaches call absent students they did not reach in the morning. If the coach is unable to contact a student after two attempts, a home visit is scheduled for the following

day. The transitional coaches consider themselves on call at night, on the weekends, and during the summer. One coach said, “We are available to our youth when they are in crisis, no matter when that crisis happens.” In addition, transitional coaches often stay in contact with students who drop out of the program, offering support and encouraging them to return.

Enrichment – ADP staff have taken students camping, hiking, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing through a partnership with the Appalachian Mountain Club’s Youth Opportunities Program. Other enrichment opportunities have included snow tubing and trips to a local trampoline park. Staff members reported that these trips not only strengthen the bonds among staff and students, but also provide an opportunity for students to see new places outside of Lowell. In addition to ADP-specific enrichment, students participate in UTEC-wide programs, such as the basketball team.

Because UTEC is a community-based youth organization focused on civic engagement, ADP students participate in civic offerings related to community organizing and youth advocacy. Students have participated in Teens Leading the Way, a UTEC-based “youth-led coalition which seeks to empower young people to create lasting change through policy-making. Youth in Teens Leading the Way (ages 15–20) create and maintain campaigns to bring about social change on the state-wide level.”² Through this coalition, many ADP students have visited the Massachusetts State House to advocate for youth causes, such as lowering the voting age to 17 years old.

Student Outcomes

Between 2010–11 and 2014–15, ADP served 77 students. Staff report that success can be measured by students’ attainment of both short- and long-term goals. In the short term, the program seeks to develop students’ independence and confidence while fostering good decision-making skills. A student’s overall development takes place gradually over time. It is expected that students will experience some setbacks and rebounds during the process. Evidence of students’ reaching these goals includes an increase in program attendance and engagement. According to one transitional coach,

For me, the most important thing is their development as an individual and a citizen of this community. What can they bring to the community? Once they understand those things,

everything will fall into place. Once they understand who they are and what they are supposed to do, they want to do it themselves. Our goals for them become their goals for themselves. When students first start the program, they often just want to finish the program, but as they experience academic success and are exposed to different things, they begin to think, 'Hey, I'm good at this! I might want to go to school for this and do this for a career.' We figure out what they really want to do together. They see themselves as accomplishing more ... that they are capable of more than they originally thought.

As of October 2014, of the 77 students who participated in ADP between 2011–12 and 2013–14, 26 (34%) received their high school diploma and 2 (3%) received a high school certificate of attainment. Eighteen students (23%) remained enrolled in the program, and 7 (9%) dropped out. An additional 22 students (29%) transferred (2 in state, 12 out of state, and 8 to an adult diploma program) and 2 students (3%) aged out of the program.

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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Footnotes

1. Lowell High Profile,” Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01600505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=300&>
2. Teens Leading The Way,” UTEC, accessed March 12, 2015 <https://www.utec-lowell.org/programs/teensleadingtheway>

