MassGrad Implementation Awards Case Study

Drury High School, North Adams, Massachusetts

Introduction

This case study highlights three dropout prevention programs at Drury High School in North Adams, a city of 14,000 residents in rural western Massachusetts. The case study's main purpose is to support school personnel throughout Massachusetts who plan to conduct or are already conducting similar programs.

The three programs are supported by the MassGrad initiative of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). 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, including Drury High School, received "Implementation Awards" through a competitive application process. Drury High School received an award of $237,500 to be used during the 2010–11 through 2014–15 school years. The award funded the programs discussed in this case study.

Drury High School was selected as a case study site by 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 6.2% to 3.8%, and it's 4-year graduation rate increased from 73.3% to 79.6%.

MassGrad Implementation awardees could select up to three out of seven dropout prevention strategies that ESE specified as "evidence based." The three programs that Drury High School selected are described briefly below, and then in greater detail in the rest of the case study.

1. Adult advocates for student support – Graduation coaches at Drury High School help students at high risk for dropping out to meet academic and personal needs through personal coaching, academic support, case management, family involvement, and a sustained personal relationship. Coaches also work to re-engage and provide supports to students who have already dropped out.

2. Service and work-based learning – Students in a small, off-campus alternative program complete group projects that combine community service with academic learning, such as doing a river clean-up and creating a line of clothing. During the school day, they also complete internships related to their interests, such as with a computer help desk, a dog grooming service, and a Head Start program.

3. Online courses for credit recovery – Students take courses online in a computer lab at school to "recover" credits from courses they have failed in a traditional classroom format.

Overview

Drury High School's goal for their Implementation award programs was to improve student attendance, grades, and behavior, which they believed were the three keys to improving graduation rates. The district's research director said, "If those things fall apart, we know that the student is on the road to dropping out." The school administrators are thoughtful and base decisions on evidence, carefully tracking student outcomes and making program adjustments at least annually. They explained that schools seldom have the luxury of a comprehensive planning process, so it was important to get the

programs started quickly and then refine them over time.

In 2014, Drury High School enrolled 459 students in grades 8–12, of whom 56% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, 22% received special education services, and 1% were English language learners. The student population was 81% White, 7% Hispanic, 7% Multi-Race Non-Hispanic, 4% African American, 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Asian and Native American.[1] The three MassGrad programs mostly targeted low-income students and students with disabilities, because a 2009 analysis conducted by the North Adams district showed that those students were at much greater risk for dropping out than other students.

Adult Advocates

"A lot of my students would have dropped out already if they hadn't had this outlet …. With a graduation coach, they have someone to come down to, break up their day, get them organized, help them with their work, keep them focused and motivated. Because a lot of these kids, when they leave this building, they're pretty much on their own." – Drury High School graduation coach

The graduation coach plays a variety of roles, depending on each student's needs. The coaches felt that, for many students, the personal, supportive relationship between coach and student is an essential precursor to many of the other benefits of having a graduation coach. It helps students know that there is an adult who knows them well and serves as their advocate. One coach said that one of her students "needed a safe place to come, be, rejuvenate, and talk to someone. For her it's been a lot of emotional support. She needs a quiet space to do work, because her home life is so chaotic."

One coach said, "We play the in-school parent in some ways. It's an extra hand guiding them. We teach them the skills they need to be successful and independent on their own, such as time management and organizational strategies." The coaches also serve as a point of accountability— checking in regularly with students and staff about attendance, behavior, and academic progress, and then recognizing successes, sharing concerns, or reminding a student who has a free period to make up a test. In some cases, graduation coaches reported attending students' sports games or giving them a morning wake-up call. In addition, coaches serve as case managers, directing students to academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional resources within and outside the school.

At the beginning of the year, coaches meet with students to discuss goals, expectations, and parent/ guardian involvement. With the help of their coach, students develop individual goals, benchmarks, and an action plan. For example, a student may set a goal to write down all of her assignments, complete 70% of her homework, or get up 10 minutes earlier to avoid being late for school. During weekly meetings, coaches follow up with students on these plans.

Coaches provide some direct academic support, helping students with classroom assignments, homework, or test preparation. One coach reported an intensive intervention, when a student came to her with an 18% average in biology and three weeks left in the quarter. She worked with him one-on-one for an hour daily, and he earned a 73% for the quarter. During a meeting with another student, a graduation coach moved fluidly between helping with math problems, strategizing about how to avoid additional suspensions for aggressive behavior, and offering advice on communicating clearly with teachers to avoid being penalized for upcoming absences related to a parent's medical problems.

Student Selection – The graduation coaches focus on students in grades 9–11, because the guidance counselors serve in a similar role for struggling seniors. To determine which students will be assigned to a graduation coach, the school begins with indicators such as attendance, grades, credit accumulation, disciplinary issues, and the state's Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS). Then the list is supplemented by communications from school personnel about students who are particularly struggling. During the first several weeks of the school year, the graduation coaches also reach out to students who have already dropped out, and students who are re-engaged receive a graduation coach.

Over time, the school has assigned coaches to students earlier in the school year, with assignments now taking place mostly in September and October. One coach feels that assignments would ideally happen by late August so that outreach could begin before the school year started and students could know that someone was awaiting their arrival and ready to provide support. Due to the high demand for graduation coaches, students who repeatedly miss meetings with the coach or do not appear to be benefiting are sometimes switched to one of the school's other interventions, enabling the graduation coach to take on a new student.

Staffing and Scheduling – In the first year, the program enlisted 26 school personnel to serve as stipended graduation coaches for 4 students each during free periods and before or after school. The role proved too demanding for the available time and compensation, and only two coaches wanted to continue their role the subsequent year. Instead, the school shifted to hiring three full-time coaches in Year 2, and then two full-time coaches in Years 3 and 4 due to a reduction in MassGrad funding. (It's notable that multiple MassGrad schools transitioned from having a large number of part-time coaches to a much smaller number of full-time coaches.)

The full-time coaches have caseloads of about 20 students whom they see intensively (as often as brief, daily meetings), and about another 10 students whom they monitor less intensively (e.g., reminding them of missed assignments as viewed on the school's grading software). Coaches work more intensively with students who are struggling the most in terms of attendance, grades, and behavior.

In addition to seeing students in their offices, the coaches are assigned to lunch duty daily and use that time to connect informally with students individually or in small groups. The coaches feel that longer, planned meetings are also essential. In the first two years, coaches often scheduled these meetings by pulling students out of classes or trying to meet with them after school. This caused learning and transportation problems that were addressed in later years by scheduling meetings during students' free periods or support periods whenever possible.

Collaboration with other school personnel – The graduation coaches emphasized the importance of collaborating with administrators, teachers, and student support personnel. Administrators were essential in explaining and advocating for the graduation coaches' role, such as allaying concerns that coaches would oppose teachers in support of students. The principal developed a brochure that was put in all teachers' mailboxes describing the role of the graduation coach and what help they could provide. The coaches also said that administrators should define the graduation coach's role clearly, such as the balance of academic versus socio-emotional interventions, and the types of issues that should be handled by coaches versus guidance counselors and school adjustment counselors.

The graduation coaches collaborate closely with the school's guidance and support team, meeting every two weeks with them to discuss academic and discipline issues and identify intervention strategies

for specific students. Teachers sometimes sent students to see their graduation coach when it appeared that the student needed a break from the classroom. Coaches also used the school's grading software to identify assignments that students needed to make up, and then communicated with teachers (or helped students communicate with their teachers) to determine next steps.

Service and Work-based Learning

"*Doing the work-based learning and 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.*" – E3 Academy program coordinator

The E3 Academy is an alternative program for Drury High School students who are at least two years behind in credit accumulation, some of whom have already dropped out and been re-engaged. The program serves 12 students, has three staff members, and meets in a mill building a few miles from the high school. E3 requires students to learn and demonstrate career competencies, and the program created service learning and internship components to help students develop these competencies. The two program components were developed and are run by an E3 staff member who is a clinical social worker.

Service Learning – The aims of the E3 Academy are closely aligned with the description of service learning in the MassGrad program materials,

Service-learning is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Through service-learning, students build 21st century skills like global awareness, entrepreneurship, leadership, and teamwork as they work together to discover needs/problems in their communities and identify and implement solutions to address them.

Each semester the service learning activities have a theme that enables integration of academic learning with community service. For the fall 2014 semester, the service learning focused on the local Hoosic River, which provided opportunities to study history and science while doing community service work. The program collaborated with Hoosic River Revival,

a local non-profit organization, to revive an overgrown walking trail along the river. Students removed Japanese knotweed, an invasive species, by hand and dragged it to the end of the trail. The department of public works provided a backhoe and filled multiple dump trucks, and the students "were excited to see the big machinery needed to support the work they had done by hand."

The program coordinator reported that the trail work was strenuous, and over the course of four weeks students became less enthusiastic and made comments such as, "We're not getting paid. We're not slaves." This led to conversations with students to discuss their feelings, identify the academic and career-related learning that was happening, and tie it to the internships they were preparing for.

At the end of the project the program planned and hosted a community celebration. An article in the local newspaper reported that "A city trail in desperate need of a makeover has received a full facelift, thanks to local students …. 'You took a piece of nothing and made it something great,' [Mayor Richard] Alcombright told the students.'"[2] The program coordinator said students learned that "if you stick it out through the hard parts, you get recognition from your community." She believes that service learning projects help students develop a work ethic that many of them lack, and that knowing they are fulfilling a community need motivates them.

The following semester's theme was business and entrepreneurship, and program staff guided the students in creating a business making t-shirts and sweatshirts that were intended to boost the city's image. The students conducted market research at school and in the community to determine what apparel would be most likely to sell, and they

developed the motto "Find it, love it. North Adams." They worked together to develop a graphic design, then brought in a professional designer who critiqued the students' work candidly. According to the program coordinator, this feedback "prompted students to do the hard work of improving the design."

The students also made marketing pamphlets and a Facebook page[3] for their apparel company, which they called "NAMApparel" (with the first four letters representing North Adams, Massachusetts). The page remains active more than a year later, with photos of people wearing the apparel around town, and marketing announcements such as "Drury seniors are saying the gift they want most for graduation is a NAMApparel tee shirt or hoodie!! Hurry and get yours at Berkshire Emporium & Antiques; graduation is THURSDAY!!" When the apparel was ready for sale, the students held a press conference at North Adams City Hall and presented the mayor with his own t-shirt; the event was covered by the two main local news outlets.

A subsequent phase of this work has involved individual students using the NAMApparel experience to design their own businesses that combine their interests with needs of the community. In the spring of 2015 they were generating business ideas and developing surveys as a step toward writing a business plan. The program coordinator planned to arrange for students to present their business plans to local business people.

The program coordinator explained that these service learning projects enable students to practice work skills within the safety of the E3 program that they can then utilize in their internships. She said,

E3 students working on a trail maintenance project

Before they start any kind of internship, it's important to have spent a fair amount of time working on workplace skills—like showing up on time and dressing appropriately. And just having those conversations openly and frequently, so that when students do get into an internship placement, they're not freaking people out or getting freaked out by people's responses to the way they're behaving. That may seem obvious, but it's new and challenging for some of our students who have never had to do any of that stuff.
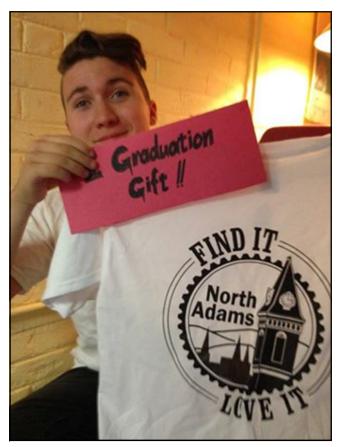
Internships – All E3 students participate in internships outside of the school. The program coordinator is responsible for identifying internship opportunities and recruiting host organizations and mentors. To date, placements have been with a carpenter, a veterinarian, a Head Start program, a concert planner, a technology help desk, an ambulance company, an attorney, a dog grooming service, a greenhouse, a health center, and the office staff at a non-profit organization, among others.

Students begin the school year by discussing what they like to do, completing a career interest survey, and identifying jobs related to those interests. They also participate in activities to learn E3's required social and emotional competencies, which include speaking and acting appropriately with adults in the workplace. These competencies provide a common language between students and E3 personnel that is used to support students in their internships.

Before beginning an internship, students must have at least 90% attendance at E3 and have a consistent record of calling the program on days when they will be absent. E3 has found that a student's poor attendance or lack of responsibility can result in a mentor ending the student's internship and being less likely to take other students in the future. Students are also held back from internships, or may have their internship hours reduced, if they fall behind academically.

The school attempts to place all students in internships by January. In the program's first two years, different students did their internships on different days of the week. This greatly complicated in-school projects and coursework, because a substantial number of students were absent from school on most days, and the program coordinator frequently needed to leave the building to drive students to and from internships. Now almost all internships take place on Thursdays, and the school has arranged other transportation for many students (e.g., family members, public transportation, a paid van service, or students driving themselves).

The program utilizes the Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan (WBLP)[4] to organize internships. It is a brief diagnostic, goal-setting, and assessment tool that is available in written or online form and designed to improve learning and productivity in work-based learning placements. In addition to a job description and eight "foundation skills" (e.g., speaking, listening, attendance and punctuality, taking initiative, accepting direction and constructive criticism), it has spaces to add three skills that are most relevant to a

Marketing NAMApparel

specific internship (e.g., a student working at a computer help desk had to assemble a computer and troubleshoot user issues successfully three times).

The program coordinator works with students and mentors to fill out the WBLP during initial meetings. It includes a section for mentors to rate students on each foundation skill and internship-specific skill at five levels—"advanced," "proficient," "competent," "needs development," and "performance improvement plan needed." At E3, these ratings are typically completed several weeks into the internship, and a second time later if the first review revealed serious concerns. The coordinator reported that the WBLP serves as a useful guide for many mentors to determine what they should be doing with students, and it helps them frame and follow up on very specific goals for students.

Finding appropriate mentors for some students' interests has been challenging and can require creativity and flexibility. One student wanted to be a Marine, and there were too many liability issues in working with the police or fire department, so the student interned with a local ambulance service. Another student wanted to be a voice actor and interned with a group that reads books to older adults.

One student kept changing her mind about her interests, which the coordinator interpreted in part as the student's anxiety about entering a professional setting. She eventually selected an internship for the student and took her there "kicking and screaming," but they were able to process the experience in terms of the social and emotional competencies they had studied as part of E3's curriculum. The internship was helping with office tasks at a local non-profit organization, and the student discovered that she was able to work well with adults and enjoyed the work. The E3 coordinator emphasized the importance of pushing students beyond their comfort zone while also ensuring that students feel safe and supported in school and at their internship sites.

Many successes of the internship program were reported, such as students who began attending school more regularly, became more engaged in their academic work, found school more relevant than before, and improved their behavior due to the demands of their internship setting. A student who worked with an auto mechanic was highly motivated and quickly increased his hours from one to three afternoons per week. Students also learned what they didn't like, such as a girl who wanted to work on a farm but discovered that she disliked the physical labor.

Many mentors also worked hard to provide strong learning experiences. A farmer sent his intern into the pig pen every day of her internship and gave her a list of questions to answer about every pig, because, he said, "You have to know your animals." A mentor at a bicycle repair shop taught the student a new repair or customer service skill each day. And a student working with a university food services program spent one day working the salad bar, one day at the breakfast grill making eggs, and another day cutting potatoes.

The program coordinator felt that the program has provided students with positive role models for professional behavior and satisfaction with one's work. She said that internships "really give students an opportunity to see people working actively, to be one of those people, and to find out that you feel good at the end of three hours of doing something useful." She strongly believed that some students who became deeply engaged in their internships would have dropped out of high school without the opportunity it provided. One mentor supported E3's dropout prevention agenda explicitly, offering to hire his intern as a full-time employee—but only after graduation.

Online Courses for Credit Recovery

Many Drury High School students take courses online that they have previously failed in the classroom—an approach known as "online credit recovery." The courses are offered during the school day in a computer lab staffed by a teacher or paraprofessional who supervises from 5 to 15 students per period across multiple academic disciplines and grade levels. Students progress at their own pace, and can also work from home, so typically no two students are engaged in the same activity at the same time.

Initially, Drury High School staff developed customized courses using the Moodle online course platform, but updating the courses and developing new ones was too time-consuming. For the 2012–13 school year, the school switched to Plato courses developed by Edmentum, an external vendor. "We decided that Plato has more options and is more responsive," the credit recovery coordinator explained. They used Plato courses for three years, but starting in the 2015–16 school year they will transition to Edgenuity, whose courses they feel are more rigorous and interactive, provide more options for special education students, and have better metrics for tracking student progress and performance.[5]

Online courses for credit recovery are offered as needed to students in all grades, who are typically scheduled into the credit recovery classroom for one period per day. In addition, some students who are 19–20 years old, have passed the MCAS, and need one or two credits for graduation come to school for the first half of the day, work on one or two online courses, and then go home, until they have earned the credits they need. Several students have graduated through this option. Many students at all grade levels have successfully recovered credits through online courses, and staff believe that many of these students would have dropped out without this opportunity.

The staff see numerous advantages to online courses for their students. First, students have the flexibility to access other needed resources, such as guidance counselors or medical appointments, without missing classroom activities that are difficult to make up. Second, since Plato courses begin with pre-tests that adjust course content based on what students already know, students who failed a traditional class but learned most of the material can finish the credit

recovery course quickly. Third, students who have frequent conflicts with classroom teachers can't have similar conflicts with a computer, and the break from face-to-face interactions that online courses provide helps them tolerate others and perform better in their traditional classes. Fourth, one teacher reported,

> In traditional classes, some students feel like they are in trouble if they don't understand something, but Plato doesn't make them feel that way. Plato makes them feel like they can try until they get it right. Even with teachers who are compassionate, some students don't feel like they have the time to get it right.

Originally, online courses were offered after school, but very few students attended. Now the courses are offered during the school day. Enrollment in online courses now takes place in early September, rather than in October or later in the past, which has resulted in a more efficient use of the school year. This change enabled the school to reduce the time scheduled for each course from two semesters to one, and students are still passing courses at about the same rate (65%) as when they were scheduled for two semesters.

For two years the school offered "booster" courses that enabled students to use Plato to make up a failed first or second quarter of a traditional class while completing the rest of the course in the classroom. Although most students passed the booster course, only about 15% had strong enough classroom performance in the 3rd and 4th quarters to pass the course for the year, so the school stopped offering booster courses. Instead, students who fail are offered a full credit recovery course the following school year.

To address perceived gaps between Plato and classroom courses, all students are required to complete an offline activity for every online course. For example, teachers felt that online English courses did not require enough writing or sustained reading, so they replaced one Plato unit with reading a novel and writing a related essay. This assignment takes the place of the final exam that the district requires for all courses, and it counts for 20% of the course grade. The remainder of the course grade is based on the two quarter grades. Each quarter grade is based 70% on performance on Plato assessments and 30% on the school's "responsibility and productivity rubric," which is included as an appendix to this case study.

Staff felt that their responsibility and productivity rubric's four dimensions—productivity, time management, respect, and attendance—are essential to success in online courses. The rubric is used to help students become more reflective about their productivity, in order to spend more time on task, get more done, and improve their self-regulation skills. Students and the teacher complete the rubric separately each week and then meet to compare and discuss their assessments. The "module goal" referenced in the rubric dimensions corresponds to the percentage of course modules that students aim to complete each week in order to complete the course within one semester. Both the teacher and the courseware provide metrics and graphics that help teachers and students to track progress, and the teachers remind students of these metrics frequently.

Being a credit recovery teacher appears to be its own teaching specialty area, requiring expertise in administering the courseware, the ability to support students across multiple disciplines, and a range of strategies to support and motivate students in a context that is very different from the traditional classroom. When the credit recovery teacher lacks subject matter knowledge needed to support a student's course, the school attempts to connect the student with another teacher during a prep period or after school.

Drury High School now sees online courses as an essential part of their student support and dropout prevention strategies. Nonetheless, the school explicitly favors traditional classroom courses over online courses, so they have taken steps to ensure that online courses do not become a way for teachers or administrators to avoid problems that could be resolved while keeping a student in the traditional classroom setting. These steps include scheduling a student for an online course only after an administrator has met with the student, teacher, and parent to confirm the need for the change.

Outcomes

From school year 2011–12 through school year 2013–14, a total of 215 students received services supported by the MassGrad Implementation award. Of these students, 100 (46%) are still enrolled, 82 (38%) have graduated or earned a certificate of attainment, 12 (6%) have transferred, and 21 (10%) have dropped out. The table on the next page summarizes the most recent available enrollment status (as of October, 2014) for these 215 students, by Implementation award strategy. Some students have participated in multiple strategies and are therefore included in multiple rows.

Most Recent Enrollment Status of Participants, by Strategy					
Strategy	**# of Students**	**Graduate or Certificate of Attainment**	**Enrolled**	**Transferred**	**Dropped Out**
Adult Advocates	119	37 (31%)	60 (50%)	8 (7%)	14 (12%)
Credit Recovery	150	60 (40%)	69 (46%)	7 (5%)	14 (9%)
Service and Work-Based Learning	31	20 (65%)	6 (19%)	1 (3%)	4 (13%)
Across all Years and Strategies	**215**	**100 (46%)**	**82 (38%)**	**12 (6%)**	**21 (10%)**

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

Acknowledgments

Footnotes

1. "Massachusetts School and District Profiles." Enrollment Data (2013–14). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d. Web. Accessed April 2, 2015. http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/ student.aspx? orgcode=02090505&orgtypecode=6&

2. Shanks, Adam. "Students Blaze Trail for School, North Adams." North Adams Transcript 27 Nov. 2013: A3. Print.

3. https://www.facebook.com/namapparelbye3

4. "Skill Pages Website: Massachusetts Work based Learning Plan." HOME. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d. Web. Accessed April 2, 2015. http://skillspages.com/masswbl/

5. Plato, Edgenuity, and other vendors' courses are each used by several MassGrad Implementation award schools. ESE has not formally evaluated the relative merits of different courseware options.

Responsibility and Productivity Rubric from Drury High School's Learning Lab

Student's Name _____ **Quarter** _____ **Week Ending**_____

Criteria	4	3	2	1	Student Score	Teacher Score
Attendance	Student had perfect attendance.	Student missed school, however, it was excused.	Student missed one day of school with no excuse.	Student missed two or more days of school with no excuse.		
Productivity	Student exceeded their individual weekly module goal.	Student completed 100% of their weekly module goal.	Student completed at least 75% of their weekly module goal.	Student completed less than 75% of their weekly module goal.		
Respect	Student was always respectful to peers and staff and used proper etiquette at all times.	Student was usually respectful to peers and staff and used proper etiquette most of the time.	Student was sometimes respectful to peers and staff and used proper etiquette some of the time.	Student was never respectful to peers and staff and rarely used proper etiquette.		
Time Management Skills	Never needed on-task reminders or redirection to meet program goals.	Rarely needed on-task reminders or redirection to meet program goals	Usually needed on-task reminders or redirection to meet program goals	Always needed on-task reminders or redirection to meet program goals		

Score-to-grade Conversion: 16 = 100   15 = 95   14 = 90   13 = 85   12 = 80 11 or lower = Student will have a teacher/student conference to discuss low score(s). If there is more than a 10 point discrepancy between student score and teacher score, a meeting to discuss why will also take place.

Date _____   Comment:_____

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_____