



A Guide for Rural High School Graduation Coach Implementation

A Practice Guide



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INTRODUCTION

WHY CONSIDER GRADUATION COACHES

Graduating students is everyone’s responsibility. Achieving school completion must be a diversified effort targeting the individual challenges that are unique to each member of a school’s at-risk population. Graduation has a greater chance of occurring among the at-risk population when coordinated by an individual focused on supporting their challenges and removing barriers—a graduation coach. A graduation coach helps to support the culture of the community and works to establish connections with community members who have the ability to affect student success. The coach establishes strong relationships with at-risk students and helps them develop educational and career goals; they provide an opportunity for students to visualize a successful future. Graduation coaches support student self-efficacy. According to Bandura (as cited in Price-Mitchell, 2016), “self-efficacy is a determining factor in how we feel, think, behave, and motivate ourselves in the world.” Graduation coaches build relationships and pathways to resources in order to promote the development of student self-efficacy. Following the steps below will drive the development and implementation of a strong graduation coach program. A summary tool at the end of the guide (Appendix A) provides an assessment of a school’s need and status for the implementation of a graduation coach program.

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR A GRADUATION COACH INITIATIVE IN A RURAL CONTEXT

STEP 1: DEVELOP STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT

A graduation coach program requires support from school and community stakeholders. Implementation of a graduation coach program should focus on the unique challenges and circumstances of the community. In a rural setting these conditions may include geographic isolation, low population density, mobility, limitation of fiscal resources, lack of expertise and human resources, personal familiarity, resistance to innovation, and absence of ancillary services, as well as other challenges indigenous to a region or location (Harmon, 2015). The existence of a rural challenge is excellent justification for a graduation coach program. For example, in an isolated community with a widely dispersed population, the graduation coach provides a strong connection between school and home fostering contact and promoting stronger communication than would typically occur through routine school communication channels. Instructional concerns in all areas can be communicated through one voice and provide a focused pathway for two-way conversation between home and school. Not only would an at-risk student have an advocate for success, but also the home would have a school contact who is intimately connected to all aspects of the student’s academic and extracurricular life. This level of involvement and communication promotes trust and is key to a successful graduation coach program.

Providing program function and outcome information establishes and maintains program support in the community, school, and home. The economics of dropping out of school affects more than just the individual or the immediate family. Typically, students who drop out of school earn less

over their lifetime, experience a higher unemployment rate, pay less in taxes, and rely more on public health programs (Levin & Rouse, 2012). The median weekly earnings in 2014 for those without a high school diploma was \$488, those with a high school diploma \$668, and those with an associate's degree \$761, while the unemployment rate for these groups respectively was 9.0%, 6.0%, and 4.5% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). Reduced tax revenue can result in the loss of millions of dollars annually for a state resulting in fewer public services including educational programs and interventions. Institutionalization resulting from criminal activity among young high school dropouts is 63 times higher than among young four-year college graduates (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Strong intervention programs must focus on close mentoring and monitoring of at-risk students (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

GRADUATION COACH FUNDING AND RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS

STEP 2: DETERMINE STAFF TIME ALLOCATION AND CASELOAD

Funding should be sought for a full-time graduation coach and any additional staff (e.g., tutoring services not provided by faculty) required by the program. The graduation coach position should be a full-time position. Multipositioned job descriptions often result in graduation coach responsibilities being overshadowed or replaced by other nonrelated responsibilities; it dilutes the effectiveness of the program. The rural region does not define the entire nature of the at-risk population. While many common challenges may exist across a group of students, each student as an individual represents a set of unique characteristics and needs that must be addressed by the graduation coach. These diverse responsibilities and challenges of the graduation coach are frequently time consuming and multifaceted, warranting greater attention to the students and their situations. This is especially challenging for a person with a part-time position or one with a job description composed of multiple disparate roles. With the existence of a single graduation coach in a school or system, the challenge of professional learning and collaborative growth can be daunting. Partnerships with other schools and/or systems can alleviate the demands of these challenges through shared opportunities. Educational service agencies can provide assistance with these partnerships through job-alike professional learning communities. According to the Association of Education Service Agencies, educational service agencies exist in 45 states.

The caseload of a graduation coach is often overwhelming especially during initial implementation of the program. Focusing on prioritizing student needs helps to alleviate this overload. A new graduation coach in a new coaching program should approach implementation sequentially targeting the most at-risk issues first. As the program develops, focus should transfer from reactive and crisis averting to proactive and intentional support of students as they transition through their educational career.

Funding for the graduation coach program should support, at a minimum, a room to house the program, cultural and recreational activities, transition programs, career counseling, and tutoring not provided by faculty. Funding of extended or supplemental programs may be achieved through partnerships with the community and local businesses. These partnerships may extend and enrich programs beyond the scope of the school or system budget.

SELECTING THE RIGHT GRADUATION COACH FOR THE RURAL CONTEXT

STEP 3: SELECT THE RIGHT PERSONNEL

A key requirement of effective graduation coaching in a rural context involves identifying the challenges of the particular rural setting. Establishment of a job description should reflect local rural challenges, as well as the requirements necessary for working with at-risk students. The following is a selected list of general skills and characteristics a successful graduation coach should possess (Georgia Department of Education, 2008; Edmonton Catholic Schools, n.d.

- Communicates effectively
- Maintains confidentiality
- Works calmly in challenging situations
- Advocates and assists at-risk students
- Supervises students effectively
- Maintains accessibility to students, families, and other stakeholders
- Collects, analyzes, and uses data
- Demonstrates persistence
- Demonstrates knowledge of alternative education opportunities and community resources
- Demonstrates knowledge of school/system policies
- Demonstrates a willingness to participate in the school community (e.g., attends staff meetings, communicates with counselors, and attends applicable extracurricular events)

STRUCTURING THE GRADUATION COACH PROGRAM FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

STEP 4: DESIGNATE TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In order to address the individual challenges and opportunities of each rural setting, it is important to develop an implementation plan and timeline. The program plan should include a system for identifying at-risk students and provide transitional support, mentoring, tutoring, cultural support, and career planning. This should occur through the perceptual lens of community culture, as well as distance, resources, and size challenges. Relationships should be developed with school personnel, students, families, and support service providers. The program plan should represent the role and function of the graduation coach program. It should also represent the goals of the school/system, be widely distributed, monitored for success, and undergo consistent review for continual improvement. The program should incorporate a team of individuals focused on implementing and supporting the program and its goals. The team should be composed of the graduation coach and representation from administration, faculty and staff, tutoring staff, parents, participants, and other stakeholders who can provide assistance and guidance.

PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

The following program components are necessary to form the foundation of a graduation coach program (Hubert & Furth, 2013). A template is located at the end of the guide (Appendices B – E) that provides an opportunity to develop a program framework that incorporates the characteristics and challenges of a specific rural community.

COMMUNITY-SCHOOL/SYSTEM DESCRIPTION

- A description of the need for the graduation coach program including a description of the rural environment and the challenges faced by students.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

- Develop specific measurable goals and objectives addressing the needs of the graduation coach program.
- Define staff to implement the graduation coach program.
- Define strategies to address the rural challenges.
- Define strategies for collecting information to guide participant cultural and/or extracurricular interests.
- Define strategies for collecting information to guide parent involvement components of the graduation coach program.
- Define strategies for sustainability of funding for the graduation coach program including paid staff.
- Define the stakeholders composing the graduation coach team.

STAFF

- Develop job descriptions for required staff.
- Define funding for required staff.

PARTICIPATING FACULTY AND STAFF/MENTORS/VOLUNTEERS/PARTNERS

- Develop job descriptions for required program support personnel.
- Define funding for required program support personnel.

EVALUATION DESIGN

- Define quantitative and qualitative goals and objectives.
- Develop data collection strategies and timelines.
- Define data collection personnel.
- Determine evaluator source and cost.

BUDGET

- Develop a comprehensive budget for implementation and evaluation (Step 5) of the graduation coach program.

EVALUATING THE GRADUATION COACH INITIATIVE

STEP 5: EVALUATE THE PROGRAM

Program effectiveness and guidance should be determined through quantitative and qualitative data analysis. This data collection and analysis (evaluation) can help the program function more effectively and efficiently, provide for stronger partnerships, and increase the transition of more students from high school to postsecondary education or the workforce. While evaluation designs should be as unique as the population of each rural school/system, some components should occur in every evaluation. A complete program description should exist with a purposeful analysis of performance data (e.g., the percentage of students in the program completing school, the percentage of courses successfully completed, the percentage of participants in cultural and/or extracurricular opportunities, and the percentage of parents participating in family opportunities). There should be a strong qualitative component incorporating feedback from multiple sources and pathways. Observations, interviews, monitoring logs, meeting minutes, and surveys may serve as qualitative data sources. An evaluative component is necessary in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program, areas for improvement, and recommendations for future implementation (Lessard, 2014). The following evaluation design, modified for each individual program defined by individual rural challenges, will provide for strong analysis of the program. Rural challenges typically include geographic isolation, culture, low population density, mobility, fiscal resources limitations, lack of expertise and human resources, personal familiarity, resistance to innovation, and lack of ancillary services.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

- May include:
 - analysis of job descriptions
 - analysis of timelines
 - program schedules and implementations
 - analysis of the organizational chart
 - procedures for identifying participants
 - procedures for determining family programs
 - growth of the project through a brief history

GOAL/OBJECTIVE-DEFINED QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

- Analysis
- Recommendations

GOAL/OBJECTIVE-DEFINED QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

- Analysis
- Recommendations

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Appendix A

Assess Your Potential to Implement a Graduation Coach Program

Implementation of a graduation coach program has the potential to alleviate the stresses of school participation in a rural environment. The program can foster relationships and create a sense of belonging and purpose among at-risk students while challenging them to understand the value of completing high school. The following checklist can help assess the feasibility of implementing a successful graduation coach program in your system/school. Once the essential requirements for program need and implementation have been identified, continued definition of challenges and implementation strategies should be developed.

Indicators		Yes	No
Rural Challenges to Graduation -- Is There Existence Of:			
Current Funding Available to Support	Personnel		
	Facilities		
	Materials and Supplies		
	Technology		
Funding Opportunities (e.g., grants) to Support	Personnel		
	Facilities		
	Materials and Supplies		
	Technology		
Program Support Exists Among	Administration		
	Faculty		
	Staff		
	Counselors		
	Students		
	Parents		
	Community		
Local Businesses			

Appendix B

Program Development Framework Template

For each goal, establish objective(s) targeting essential components of a graduation coach program.* Incorporate goals and/or objectives that target specific rural challenges of the community. Define the activity or implementation that will address each objective and the strategies for each activity/implementation and timeline for implementation. Indicate the staff, volunteers, parents, and/or community or local business support required to implement the activity/implementation.

Goal #	Goal	Objective #	Objective	Activity/Implementation	Strategies	Timeline
1		1				
		2				
		3				
2		1				
		2				
		3				
3		1				
		2				
		3				
4		1				
		2				
		3				
5		1				
		2				
		3				
6		1				
		2				
		3				

*Add rows or record not applicable (NA) as needed in your framework.

Appendix C

Program Human Resources

For each previously identified goal and objective indicate the staff, parents, community partners and/or local business partners participating to implement the objective.*

Goal.Objective #	Activity/Implementation	Staff	Parents	Community Partner(s)	Business Partner(s)
1.1					
1.2					
1.3					
2.1					
2.2					
2.3					
3.1					
3.2					
3.3					
4.1					
4.2					
4.3					
5.1					
5.2					
5.3					
6.1					
6.2					
6.3					

*Add rows or record not applicable (NA) as needed in your framework.

Appendix D

Program Evaluation Template

For each previously identified goal and objective indicate the measure of achievement and the quantitative and/or qualitative data source along with the data collection points.*

Goal/Objective #	Activity/Implementation	Measure of Achievement	Quantitative Data Source	Quantitative Data Collection Point(s)	Qualitative Data Source	Qualitative Data Collection Point(s)
1.1						
1.2						
1.3						
2.1						
2.2						
2.3						
3.1						
3.2						
3.3						
4.1						
4.2						
4.3						
5.1						
5.2						
5.3						
6.1						
6.2						
6.3						

**Add rows or record not applicable (NA) as needed in your framework.*

Appendix E

Program Budget Template

For each previously identified goal and objective indicate the budget source and the source that will be used in the future if the initial budget source has a limited timeline.*

Goal.Objective #	Activity/Implementation	Budget Source	Future Budget Source
1.1			
1.2			
1.3			
2.1			
2.2			
2.3			
3.1			
3.2			
3.3			
4.1			
4.2			
4.3			
5.1			
5.2			
5.3			
6.1			
6.2			
6.3			

**Add rows or record not applicable (NA) as needed in your framework.*