

A Guide for Graduation Coach Implementation

A publication of the National Dropout Prevention Center

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Introduction

A Graduation Coach program is one of the most effective dropout prevention strategies available to middle and high schools. However, to be effective, these programs must be well designed, properly staffed, and carefully monitored. Graduation coach programs are also one of our most expensive dropout prevention strategies due to the cost of designated personnel. (Find Source)

There is no national organization or mechanism that provides a count or inventory of America's graduation coach programs. The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) has been involved with these programs since their inception in the early 1980s. NDPC estimates that perhaps 25% but less than half of America's 40,000+ middle and high schools have some version of graduation coaches. NDPC also estimates that about half of the existing programs are effective and produce desired outcomes while many others struggle and are less effective. (Find Data and Source)

School leaders must consider the return on investment (ROI) of graduation coach programs. Leaders with effective programs must monitor them and maintain their effectiveness. Leaders with struggling programs must improve them to avoid wasteful spending. Leaders without graduation coach programs should, at a minimum, be aware of their potential to improve graduation rates and understand how to best utilize them when needed.

This practice guide provides school leaders and graduation coaches with lessons learned and critical understandings for implementing, improving, and maintaining effective graduation coach programs that produce more graduates, more resilient students, and the desired ROI. This guide also offers instruments and templates for designing, implementing, funding, and evaluating graduation coach programs.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF GRADUATION COACHES

School leaders can learn valuable lessons from the history of Graduation Coach Programs. Graduation Coaches have informally existed in schools for years, though not always with that job title. Some teachers, athletic coaches, counselors, administrators, and mentors have for years attended to the needs of specific at-risk students with the goal of supporting them to graduate. As an example, in 1986, with encouragement from the newly-established National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC), Dr. Addis while working at Wren High School in South Carolina to identify the school's 100 most unlikely-to-graduate students and guide them to graduation. Similar occurrences can be found at other high schools in that era. In the 1980s NDPC began to replicate these graduation coach efforts through conferences and publications.

in 1988, the US Department of Education awarded a limited number of dropout demonstration grants to expand and disseminate results of several graduation coach programs, including the Wren High School initiative. NDPC documented, evaluated, and disseminated the results of these grant-funded programs. Through the 1990s, various forms of graduation coach initiatives

sprang up in an unknown number of school districts across the country. Most of these were funded with state, foundation, or federal grants.

In 2006 at the urging of Governor Sonny Purdue the Georgia General Assembly appropriated funds for the first state-wide graduation coach initiative, placing a graduation coach in every Georgia high school and in 2007 coaches were also funded for all Georgia middle schools. Georgia's graduation coach initiative had a 54 million dollar annual price tag and was the largest and most comprehensive program of this type to date. At its peak, the Georgia program employed almost 900 coaches with coach qualifications, training, and job descriptions standardized by the Georgia Department of Education. Statewide results of the program were immediately evident and well documented with Georgia's statewide graduation rate rising from 72% to 79% over two years while the nation's gains were less than one percent per year.

In 2007 and 2008 NDPC publicized and promoted graduation coaches nationwide as a high impact strategy. Georgia's program was featured at the 2008 National Dropout Prevention Conference in Atlanta. Governor Sonny Purdue was honored for his leadership and over 600 coaches in attendance shared their work with over 1,200 other school leaders from all 50 states. This conference resulted in a number of states and school districts implementing their own graduation coach initiatives, though under a wide range of titles, job descriptions, and models. In 2010 Mobile County Schools, Alabama's largest district, implemented graduation coaches in a number of high schools with a federal grant, found good results, and maintains graduation coaches in their high schools to this date. One of the most impactful replications of the Georgia model occurred in Edmonton Catholic School District in Alberta, Canada. In subsequent years, Edmonton reported significant gains in First Nation (Native Canadian) graduation rates and supported over 30 other Canada school systems to replicate the model.

Just as graduation coaches were gaining popularity, the recession of 2008 negatively impacted these initiatives across America's schools. School districts and states without external funding were forced to reduce or eliminate many programs for at-risk students and many graduation coach positions were repurposed or eliminated. In Georgia, the state's 54 million dollars of annual graduation coach funding was reallocated to support general funding of local districts. Many Georgia districts eliminated graduation coach positions while some were able to maintain the positions or scale them down to locally affordable levels. Some Georgia districts like Muscogee County have maintained graduation coaches consistently since the end of state funding. At this writing, it is estimated that fewer than half of Georgia's districts have maintained graduation coaches.

In some cities like Philadelphia, mayor's offices and civic groups attempted to fill the graduation coach void with community volunteers but these programs were of less impact due to limited funding.

(Source <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/graduation-coaches/>)

Source - https://www.victoriaadvocate.com/news/highereducation/ga-schools-cut-graduation-coaches-to-help-budgets/article_c3f7c3ef-918b-5bef-abbd-4e9811fcd2a9.html

Three important lessons emerge from this brief history of graduation coaches in America.

1. Graduation coach programs are one of the highest impact dropout prevention strategies and can produce significant gains in graduation rates and in the life preparation of students.
2. Graduation coach programs are expensive due to personnel costs, are usually externally funded, and are difficult to maintain with local funds in economic hard times.
3. If a school, a district, or a state has or is considering a graduation coach program, it is imperative that it be well designed, efficient, and effective for maximum return on investment (ROI),

WHY CONSIDER GRADUATION COACHES

Graduating students is the responsibility of a team – teachers, administrators, support staff, and community - yet in many schools, this team plays without a coach. Achieving school completion must be a team effort targeting the individual challenges that are unique to each at-risk student. Graduation has a greater chance of occurring when everyone's efforts are coordinated by a designated individual focused on addressing challenges, removing barriers, guiding academic success, and building resilience —a graduation coach. A graduation coach helps shape a school graduation culture and establishes connections with community members who have the ability to affect student success. The graduation coach monitors and addresses the attendance and school engagement of at-risk students.

The coach establishes strong relationships with at-risk students themselves and orchestrates connections with other staff members. They help students to engage with school, build resilience,, and visualize a successful future. Without a graduation coach, a school's efforts to support at-risk students may be little more than random acts of dropout prevention and will be less likely to achieve desired outcomes/

BUILDING A GRADUATION COACH INITIATIVE

STEP 1: DEVELOP STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT

A graduation coach program requires support from school and community stakeholders. Understanding and support of system leadership, system governance, and the community makes funding easier to secure and maintain. Understanding and support of the school staff makes the coaches work easier and more effective.

Awareness of existing barriers and at-risk student challenges can not only identify problems for the graduation coach to address, but may also justify need for the initiative. For example, in an isolated community with a widely dispersed population, the graduation coach can create a stronger connection between school and home fostering communications that do not currently exist. In an urban or inner city setting, the graduation coach may be needed to help students

overcome the lack of nuclear family support or to help students find school-friendly part-time employment and appropriate mentors.

NDPC has found that support for graduation coach programs is best developed before programs are implemented. If programs are unexpectedly implemented before support is established, the new coach must devote time to justifying their value instead of devoting time to student service.

Support of district leadership, school staffs, and the community is best developed with information that addresses the need for and the benefits of graduation coaches. NDPC recommends that support-building information focus on the following key points

- Current graduation outcomes need to be improved.
- Everyone -school staff, parents, community – benefits from, and must be involved in, improving graduation outcomes.
- Graduation coaches serve at-risk students directly, but also work with parents, school staffs, and the community.
- Graduation coach programs are proven to work.
- Graduation coach programs are an expense, but the ROI for students, schools, family, and the community is significant.

NDPC can provide specific data, information, and examples that may be used to communicate and build support for graduation coach programs.

Developing broad support for a graduation coach program is essential, but the greatest single obstacle that must be overcome is usually funding. Whether proposed programs are to be funded by external sources such as grants or within local budgets, the funding issue must be addressed early on. NDPC estimates that the cost of one graduation coach, depending on local pay scales and qualifications, ranges from \$60,000 to \$120,000 per year for salary and benefits alone. This cost can seem prohibitive, for a small district considering one graduation coach or for large districts considering multi-school programs.

Consideration of immediate costs only always makes adoption of a graduation coach program difficult if not impossible. If funding must be local, the value of numerous programs must be weighed against each other and the longer-term gains of a graduation coach program often are deferred to other programs that seem to be more urgent and essential. If external funding, often from competitive grants, is to occur, that funding is uncertain until it is awarded. Grant applications, and responsible management, require that sustainability plans be developed to continue the program locally after a few years of grant duration. When faced with short-term grant funding and uncertain future funding, districts are often reluctant to undertake programs and add personnel that may not be funded locally after a few years..

NDPC has found that consideration of short-term funding alone may discourage aggressive implementation of graduation coach programs. Districts should consider immediate costs while simultaneously comparing those costs to immediate, intermediate, and long-term benefits. Benefits and savings to consider should include:

- Improved student behavior, attendance, engagement, and graduation rates
- Reduced work loads for school counselors and social workers

- Reduced discipline work loads for administrators
- Improved school climate
- Improved family engagement and parent support
- Improved community engagement with school and community ownership of goals and outcomes
- Improved school ratings and accountability metrics.

NDPC also finds that discussions of short-term costs should include assurances that graduation coach programs will be carefully designed and implemented to produce desired benefits and savings. It is not unusual for early discussions of graduation coach programs to assume that the new coaches will simply do good things for a selected number of the school's at-risk students. Early efforts to develop support should include clear assurances of the following:

- The program will be carefully planned and designed considering research-based best practices and experiences of other schools and districts.
- Program personnel will be carefully selected with consideration given to experience, qualifications, personal fit for duties, student interaction, and parent relations.
- Duties and job descriptions for program personnel will be carefully developed and clear for everyone.
- Necessary professional development will be provided to program personnel.
- Objectives and goals for both personnel and the overall program will be clear and regularly monitored
- Frequent reports of program conduct and results will be provided to school and district leadership, the school staff, and the community.

Building stakeholder and decision maker support for graduation coach programs must make sure that teachers, support staffs, administrators, and funding decision makers are well informed about the contemplated program. Support building, however, must also focus on benefits of the program, cost savings, and how the program will be designed and operated to insure return on investment (ROI).

STEP 2 – DETERMINE FUNDING AND PROGRAM STRUCTURE

As noted earlier, graduation coach funding can be expected to cost between \$60,000 and \$120,000 per coach at a minimum. Grant funding is sometimes available from state, federal, or foundation sources, but is sometimes difficult to secure and is usually of limited duration. Larger school districts often rely on grant procurement offices but smaller districts may lack resources and expertise to pursue grants and must rely on for-hire grant writers or assistance from regional service agencies (RESAs or CESAs). NDPC, while not a grant writing organization, can provide technical assistance and advice for graduation coach proposal development and can serve as an external evaluator for grant programs. Local funding for graduation coach programs must be either assembled from small amounts of existing school and district programs that otherwise

focus on at-risk students or must simply be appropriated by the governing body, usually the local school board, and treated as a budget line item.

NDPC recommends that program design include a full-time graduation coach for each school and any additional costs that can not be otherwise provided such as tutors or coach travel. NDPC finds that multi-position job descriptions and split positions often result in graduation coach responsibilities being overshadowed by other nonrelated duties and dilute the effectiveness of the program. Assigning a single coach to multiple campuses can also make the graduation coach unavailable to individual students at critical times of need so timely student access and availability must be considered.

With the existence of a single graduation coach in a school or system, they must often work in isolation and the challenge of professional learning and collaborative growth can be daunting. Partnerships with other schools and/or systems can alleviate these challenges through shared opportunities. Educational service agencies that exist in most states can provide assistance with these partnerships through job-alike professional learning groups. (Association of Education Service Agencies)

The caseload of a graduation coach can be overwhelming and must be manageable, especially during initial implementation of the program. Focusing on prioritized student needs helps to alleviate this overload. Consideration should be given to establishing a reasonable student case load for each coach. NDPC has found that fewer students served, perhaps 75 to 100 or less per coach, is more likely to produce better graduation rate gains than coaches spread too thin and attempting to serve several hundred at-risk students. 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 grades..

Design of the graduation coach program should provide, at a minimum, a room to house the program, cultural and recreational activities, transition programs, career counseling, and the services of external tutors and mentors.. A common cost-saving measure is to ignore professional development and networking opportunities for graduation coaches. NDPC has found that coaches who are able to attend at-risk related conferences, to learn dropout prevention strategies, and to achieve credentialing that is directly related to their work are much more effective and tend to produce best graduation rate results. Note that NDPC offers conferences and individual certification applicable to graduation coaches. Funding for extended or supplemental resources to support the work of graduation coaches may be secured through partnerships with the community and local businesses. These partnerships may extend and enrich programs beyond the scope of the school or system budget by providing things such as reward trips for students or awards for academic and behavior improvement.

NDPC recommends that initial program design include regularly scheduled program assessments and reports to district leaders and funding decision makers. While these assessments may include examples of individual success stories, district leaders, school boards, and grant funding sources tend to be most influenced by data that shows program impact. Graduation coaches and administrators overseeing their programs must always be mindful that these type of innovative programs need regular justification for sustainability.

STEP 3 – DEVELOP GUIDING PROGRAM DOCUMENTS

NDPC recommends that a set of guiding documents for the graduation coach program, or a manual of sorts, be developed and widely shared early in the implementation process. Some of these guiding documents such as the coach job description and program goals may be developed before the program begins and others such as specific program objectives and student identification criteria may be developed as coaches begin their work. NDPC has found that formation of a school site Graduation Coach Advisory Team is useful in development of and agreement on program documents and can help to build school site and system level support for the program. An advisory team might be chaired by the coach and can include an administrator, a counselor, a teacher, a parent, and a community member. A “Program Manual” and a “Program Advisory Team” can go a long way to establish program legitimacy and a sense of permanence and prevents the program from being perceived as just a new position held by a single person.

Specific components of a Graduation Coach Program Manual might include:

- The program rationale and goals
- Measurable program objectives
- Coach desired qualifications
- Coach job description and specific duties
- Program budget
- Student case load
- Student identification criteria
- Long-term program sustainability plan and schedule of steps
- Program-related responsibilities of other staff members
- Community connections and resources to be utilized
- Time line of program implementation and key time points
- Coach evaluation instrument and evaluation process description
- Program evaluation criteria, schedule, and schedule of reports

While program documents may be locally selected and developed, two items, the coach qualifications and selection criteria, and the coach job duties, are very important and NDPC suggestions are listed below for local consideration.

Skills, Qualifications, and Characteristics of the Graduation Coach

A critical element of graduation coach program success is selecting the right people for a relatively unique school position. NDPC’s experience indicates that graduation coaches who are carefully and deliberately selected with due consideration of the position challenges predict a successful program, NDPC also finds that quick, random, or placement-dictated selection of coaches predicts program problems. Following is a list of general skills and characteristics that

should be considered in the coach recruitment and selection process, (Georgia Department of Education, 2008; Edmonton Catholic Schools, n.d.

- Communicates effectively
- Maintains confidentiality
- Works calmly in challenging situations
- Advocates for, able to assist, and communicates well with at-risk students
- Supervises challenging 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 and system resources
- Demonstrates a willingness to participate in the school community (e.g., attends staff meetings, communicates with counselors, and attends applicable extracurricular events)
- Likely to be accepted by the school staff and able to facilitate staff cooperation

Duties of the Graduation Coach

NDPC recommends that the duties and job description of the graduation coach be agreed on, clearly stated, and adhered to by each coach. A not uncommon error of new coach programs is to leave job tasks to the daily discretion of the individual coach. Clear definition of coach duties maintains fidelity of the program, increases program effectiveness, and allows for meaningful program evaluation and improvement as needed. Specific duties of the graduation coach should be locally determined but the sample list below may be useful to local districts as they develop this document. Items from this list are taken in part from graduation coach documents of the Chickasha Public Schools, the full text of which are found in Appendix Z of this guide.

- Builds relationships with community entities to provide opportunities for at-risk students
- Leads ongoing identification of students to be served by the coach program in collaboration with other staff
- Assists site administration to identifying and deliver professional development to other staff members toward their support of the coach program and at-risk students
 - Assists individual staff members and staff groups to support individual at-risk students.
- Meets with, counsels, and guides designated students and families to resolve obstacles to school success, to build resilience, and achieve graduation
- Assists the school administration and counseling teams to support other programs toward at-risk student success
- Participates with in-school committees (as assigned) to enhance teacher and student development.

- Prepares statistical and other reports for internal and external constituencies, including data required to evaluate the coach program.
- Maintains records of all activities and verifies populations served.
- Coordinates student activities to foster improved student attendance
- Coordinates student activities and experiences to improve student engagement
- Attends regularly scheduled faculty meetings.
- Attends regularly scheduled district instructional coach/graduation coach meetings.
- Attends relevant professional development, as requested.
- Organizes with other instructional coaches and graduation coaches on professional development and other district initiatives.
- Performs other special assignments and duties as assigned by administration
- Performs supervisory duties as assigned

Step 4: Evaluating the Graduation Coach Program

NDPC recommends that a clear and specific evaluation design be created and implemented early in the graduation coach program process. Evaluation of the program ideally serves three purposes, those being 1) to maintain fidelity of the program, 2) to determine and validate effectiveness of the program and 3) to provide information necessary to make ongoing improvements and adjustments to the program.

Ideally, evaluation of the program should include two components, those being 1) formative evaluation to determine if the program is implemented on time and as planned, and 2) summative evaluation to determine the extent to which the program achieves its objectives, goals, and outcomes. Good program evaluation design should be locally developed and should reflect local circumstances and the desired outcomes of the program. NDPC offers the questions and topics listed below as possible components of the locally developed evaluation plan and offers Appendix C of this guide as a possible template for local use.

Formative evaluation questions might include:

- To what extent has the project implementation time line been followed?
- Have project personnel been selected with adherence the project position qualifications?
- Have project personnel been activated in a timely manner?
- To what extent have personnel attended to and performed assigned duties and tasks?
- To what extent have others such as teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, and the community been informed of and involved with the program?
- How many students have been identified for service? How many have received direct services?
- How many coach-student conferences have occurred?
- How many parent conferences have been conducted within the program??

Summative evaluation questions might include:

- What gains have been made in course grades of students served?

- What gains have been made in attendance of students served?
- What evidence is there that students served have increased levels of engagement with school?
- What improvements in behavior of students served are documented?
- What change has occurred in the number or the percentage of students served who are on-track to graduate?
- What new services for at-risk students been added as a result of the program?

Conclusion

In conclusion, graduation coach programs are one of the highest impact dropout prevention strategies available to schools, one of the most costly dropout prevention strategies, and are complex to operate effectively for best outcomes. They are one of our most underutilized strategies, are only utilized by less than half of the nation's high schools and middle schools, but are determined to be worth the expense and effort by systems and districts that use them.

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) offers this Practice Guide, the recommended assessments, and templates to support local schools and districts. NDPC also acknowledges that local circumstances, limited personnel, limited time, and limited resources may sometimes require the assistance of external experts to create graduation coach programs. NDPC employs experienced in these programs who can assist local schools and districts. NDPC's support for graduation coach programs, while always customized to meet local needs, may include:

- Professional development for leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders on graduation coach program options..
- Guidance and coaching to apply this Practice Guide
- Facilitation of a Graduation Coach Task Force to develop options for a locally appropriate program.
- Expert evaluation of current and new graduation coach programs and reports of findings.
- Ongoing guidance and coaching of the local Graduation Coach Task Force to monitor, improve, and sustain local initiatives.

For support or more information, email NDPC at ndpc@dropoutprevention.org

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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.