



GAP Advocate Program

For High School Dropout Prevention

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Executive Summary

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Graduate Advocate Program in dropout prevention. The Graduate Advocate Program was collaboration between the Instructional Unit (IU), the Assessment, Accountability, Research, and School Improvement Division (AARSI), the Curriculum and Professional Development Division (CPD), and the Technology and Information Systems Division (TISS). Graduate Advocates were counselors or teachers who supported eighth and ninth grade students who are at high risk for dropping out of high school. Support came in the form of frequent visits with students and activities developed to support interest, motivation, and academic achievement. Select students were assigned a Graduate Advocate based on student data.

The results of this study were:

- Forty-three percent of Graduate Advocates met with their students weekly; another forty percent met monthly.
- The data model established identified 24.5% of all eighth and ninth grade students as at risk for dropping out.
- Graduate Advocates believed the biggest obstacle for student drop out was failing coursework, but they were tepid about school attempts on focused instruction.
- Of those who dropped out of school, 38.7% were classified as At Risk for dropping out; 42.4% were classified as On Track to graduate.
- Students assigned a Graduate Advocate were less likely to drop out of school for up to two years after the program.
- Graduate Advocates for eighth grade students were more successful than those working with ninth grade students.
- Students assigned a Graduate Advocate had fewer absences than those who did not participate in this program.
- The Graduate Advocate program was not a deterrent for student discipline issues.
- Students assigned a Graduate Advocate in the second year of program implementation had higher GPA's than those without an advocate.
- Fewer students assigned Graduate Advocates in the second year dropped out of school than those in the first year.

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The Graduate Advocate Program was collaboration between the Instruction Unit (IU), the Assessment, Accountability, Research, and School Improvement Division (AARSI), the Curriculum and Professional Development Division (CPD), and the Technology and Information Systems Division (TISS). Teachers and counselors at middle and high schools volunteered to be Graduate Advocates. Their responsibilities were to support eighth and ninth grade students who were at high risk for dropping out of high school. Clark County School District (CCSSD) has one of the highest dropout rates in the United States. Superintendent Dwight Jones identified high school dropouts a high priority issue with the goal of increasing the percentage of students who graduate with a high school diploma.

Two-thirds of the CCSD dropouts occur in the first two years of high school. According to the recent Education Week Diplomas Count, 26.4% of CCSD student dropouts occur in ninth grade and 40.3% dropout in tenth grade. Education Week computed a cohort dropout rate, or the percentage of students who graduate from eighth grade and followed to high school graduation. The cohort rate for CCSD was computed as 43.1%. Meaning only 43.1% of CCSD eighth grades students will earn a high school diploma four years later. For state reporting purposes, the dropout rate for 2010/2011 was 4.8%.

The Graduate Advocate Program (GAP) was based on an Institute of Education Sciences 2008 Practice Guide, *Dropout Prevention*. This IES Practice Guide listed five recommendations for preventing students from dropping out of high school:

1. Utilize data systems that will identify students at high risk;
2. Assign adult advocates to those students; provide targeted academic support and instruction;
3. Provide programs that teach students skills to succeed in the classroom, including social and behavioral skills;
4. Personalize the learning environment; and
5. Engage students through rigorous and relevant instruction.

AARSI staff provided schools a tool that facilitated student selection. Individual school sites selected the graduate advocates, who then identified students with whom they would work. The other supports were provided at the school level. The program started in the second semester of the 2009/2010 school year. It ended after the 2010/2011 school year as funding for this project ended.

AARSI developed On Track as the tool to assist Graduate Advocates in identifying high risk students. The IES Practice Guide recommended using grade retention, attendance records, disciplinary records and academic assessments tracked longitudinally. On Track contained two semesters of data, including attendance data, GPA, total number of classes failed, failed core content courses (English Language Arts and Mathematics), and total credits earned. Three categories were created from this data: At Risk, which included the students at high risk for dropping out; Watch, for students who met some but not all criteria for being at risk of dropping out; and Not at Risk.

Method

Participants

All CCSD eighth and ninth grade students were assigned to one of three categories: At Risk, Watch, and On Track. At Risk was based on the number of failing courses, failing a core course, and poor attendance. The Watch category was based on failing courses or poor attendance. On Track meant students were not failing courses and had adequate attendance. Percentages by year are listed in Table 1. Some new enrollees were assigned Graduate Advocates based on criteria separate from CCSD model.

Table 1

Categorization of eighth and ninth grade students according to CCSD model

	Eighth Grade			Ninth Grade		
	On Track	Watch	At Risk	On Track	Watch	At Risk
2009/2010	13725	3762	5914	14367	4207	6325
2010/2011	13290	3768	5348	12531	4102	5164

For the first year, 48,300 students were included in On Track, 48.4% were eighth grade students and 51.6% were ninth grade students. According to On Track, 12,239 (25.3%) of eighth and ninth grade students were categorized as At Risk, another 7,969 (16.5%) were classified as Watch. The percentages were consistent between grades. District Graduate Advocates selected 11,205 students (23.1%). Of these 39.6% were eighth grade students and 58.9% were ninth grade students. High school advocates included other grades which accounted for 1.5% of all students.

Table 2

Number of students assigned a Graduate Advocate by grade and year participating

	Eighth	Ninth	Tenth	Eleventh	Twelfth	Total
2009/2010	4441	6600	9	97	58	11205
2010/2011	4219	4977	321	240	6	9763

Of students assigned Graduate Advocates for both years, 61% were male. Most were Hispanic (48.9%), White (25.1%) and African American (16.4%). Almost one-half (48.5%) participated in Free or Reduced Lunch, representing lower socio-economic status. As for supportive services, 14.6% had an Individualized Education Plan and 12.0% were classified as English Language Learners.

Graduate Advocates were surveyed about their experience. A total of 243 Graduate Advocates were identified. Of those, 198 completed the survey, a response rate of 81.5%. Fifty-seven percent of advocates who responded were teachers; the remaining 43% were school counselors. More respondents were at middle schools (52.0%) than high schools.

Instruments

A survey was developed and administered online using *Zoomerang*. Survey items examined the various components of the program; evaluate the effectiveness of each component; degree of involvement and the success of the GAP program at their school.

The District databases were used to identify and track dropouts. Students were identified as dropouts through two variables, student status and leave code. The specific codes in student status to identify potential dropouts were Inactive and No show. The specific leave codes used to classify students as dropouts were: Non-attendance for 20 days, Failing two classes, Supporting family, and Whereabouts unknown.

Results

Survey

On Track. The On Track data system was considered useful, but advocates found the data file overwhelming. Almost all (92.3%) advocates rated the On Track program useful in identifying students at high risk for dropping out. Of those, 58% strongly or moderately agree to the utility of this tool. At the same time, 78.5% found the data overwhelming with one in four (26.2%) Graduate Advocates suggesting the data file was intimidating. In the end, 89.7% percent of the Graduate Advocates reported that they used the On Track tool.

When asked about which factors they believe were the most relevant to student dropout, advocates identified failing core courses was the most important factor (52.3% strongly agree). Additionally, teachers rated core course failure higher than did the counselors. Other academic factors were also rated highly, failing multiple courses, GPA and to a lesser degree, insufficient credits earned. Discipline and attendance records were considered, but not strongly rated. Opinions as to whether student retention should be included were mixed. More Graduate Advocates disagreed (56.9%) than agreed that student retention should be included in the decision process. When asked to rank the biggest problem facing these students, academic achievement was consistently ranked highest, followed by student apathy, attendance was ranked third, and discipline last.

Professional Development. Graduate Advocates felt that they were familiar with the factors that affect student dropout with 97.9% asserting their awareness of current research. Advocates were

asked also about attending the annual workshops provided by the CPD Counseling and Guidance Department. For the 2010/2011 GAP workshop, 93.3% of respondents reported having attended; 76.8% reporting having attended the workshop last year. Most (71.6%) reported having attended both years. Almost every advocate (99.5%) reported having read the material provided with 92.3% reporting using the available information. About the same percentage of advocates (91.3%) found conversations from other schools equally informative. The use of the GAP InterAct conference was also high with 81.0% reported using those resources. The majority of Graduate Advocates (61.0%) strongly agreed that they were passionate about preventing student dropout. Another 15.0% were moderately passionate about the goals of the GAP initiative.

Online Monitoring. The online monitoring system Graduate Advocates developed by TISS was considered an effective tool in working with current students. Most advocates (84.1%) reported using the monitoring system frequently or very frequently. Only 15.4% reported using the monitoring system occasionally or seldom. One advocate reported never having used this tool. Monitoring was considered easy to use and effective by almost all advocates. When asked about using the monitoring system, perspectives were mixed about the time required using this tool. More than half of teachers agreed that the monitoring tool was time consuming with 19.5% of all teachers strongly or moderately agreeing.

Local sites. When looking at the school level, 5.2% of Graduate Advocates reported not meeting with the students on a regular basis. Most advocates reported meeting with their students weekly (42.7%) or monthly (39.6%). Some reported meeting with their students daily (11.5%). Different strategies were employed between schools in meeting with participating students. Some graduate advocates had students assign to them in an advisory period in a classroom, while other students dropped offices or classrooms at a specified time or randomly. Finally, 6.3% advocates reported meeting once a quarter. All, except one advocate, reported tracking student progress through the school year. Almost all advocates (94.8%) reported having contacted parents about their child's risk at dropping out

and the students' involvement in GAP. Many advocates (67.7%) reported that the number of students that they work with was high. Considering that one in four students are at high risk of dropping out, this perspective may be valid.

Advocates voiced that the program goals were clear (69.5%), as were the expectations for Graduate Advocates (89.8%). Advocates also reported that the program had clear direction. One goal included making student dropout a school-wide initiative. Most advocates (70.2%) agreed that GAP was impacting positively the school community and climate.

When asked about the specific interventions being implemented, responses varied. Study skills instruction was provided for students according to 75.8% of the advocates, but 51.1% of those teachers felt lukewarm about the study skills instruction. A similar pattern appeared with test taking skills instruction with 74.2% reporting the occurrence, but 52.2% responding less favorable than to other strategies. Receiving instruction in core content was perceived by teachers as better implemented. Most advocates (80.7%) reported core instruction was occurring, but 52.7% were not strong assertions. Credit recovery had the strongest response with, with 57.5% reporting that they strongly or moderately agree a credit recovery program was being used at that school.

Most schools (60.8%) offered a career day inviting the high risk students. Fifty percent of the advocates reported inviting students to a college day or to visit a college campus. Inviting community partners to assist with student dropout has been a bigger challenge with only 42.5% reporting success. Parental involvement was also a struggle, with 45.5% advocates reporting parental involvement. More than two-thirds of the advocates (68.4%) utilized incentives for at-risk students. Most (75.3%) reported that the incentives were effective. One incentive was school recognition for accomplishments of at-risk students. Sixty-five percent reported that schools were recognizing these students for their accomplishments.

Communication within the school appears to be good with 84.9% reporting positive responses, though only 14% were strongly positive. Some advocates reported that difficult discussions occurred between Graduate Advocates and teachers regarding participating students. Communication between schools was considered adequate. Almost two-thirds of the advocates (64.6%) reported that information is clear between schools regarding students being assigned a Graduate Advocate, but only 26.0% of advocates reported that discussions between schools were occurring. This could be interpreted that advocates receiving transferring students rely on the monitoring systems rather than speaking with other graduate advocates.

Overall. Graduate Advocates rated GAP highly effective. Specifically, 89.1% advocates reported observing better attendance among the students they had selected. Most advocates (82.1%) reported that these students received fewer discipline referrals. Most advocates (90.2%) reported fewer classes were failed. Advocates were not asked in this survey if classes were core content or electives. Graduate Advocates reported increases in students GPA with 39.7% strongly or moderately reporting higher GPA's while 50.5% indicated some growth among students assigned a Graduate Advocate.

Student Data

Graduate advocates were assigned to 24.4% of all eighth and ninth grade students. In the first year (2009/2010), 492 students were classified as dropouts with 75.6% coming from the ninth grade. Only 120 (37.4%) of dropouts from both grades were assigned a Graduate Advocate. Students dropped out in higher rates in ninth and tenth grade.

In the second year, 1,932 students were assigned as No Show in the Status variable. Of those, 487 (25.2%) were assigned a Graduate Advocate. In the Leave Code variable, an additional 518 students were classified as dropouts. Of those, 272 (52.5%) were assigned a Graduate Advocate the year before. The second year had a total of 2,450 students drop out with 30.3% having a Graduate Advocate the

second year. Most of these dropouts (69.2%) were in tenth grade and may have lacked access to their previous Graduate Advocate.

Of the 11,816 students assigned a Graduate Advocate, 188 dropped out in the first year (semester two) or 1.6%. In the following year 9,825 students who were assigned a Graduate Advocate in the prior year remained. Another 743 students (7.6%) dropped out during the second year, from those who were categorized as high risk and assigned a graduate advocate in that first year.

Table 3

Number of student dropouts of first year participants according to advocate assignment

	2009/2010		2010/2011		2011/2012	
Grade	Advocate	No Advocate	Advocate	No Advocate	Advocate	No Advocate
Eighth 09/10	47	118	269	897	274	687
Ninth 09/10	175	278	532	886	511	907
Total Dropouts	222	396	801	1873	785	1594
Eighth 10/11			3	4	324	592
Ninth 10/11			326	612	29	5
Total Dropouts			329	616	353	597

Statistical analysis was conducted separately by grade and by year. For eighth grade students there were significantly more dropouts for students not assigned a Graduate Advocate than those who were, $\chi^2 = 13.3$, $p < 0.001$. There was statistical significance between those who were assigned a Graduate Advocate in the number of dropouts in ninth grade as well, $\chi^2 = 15.5$, $p < 0.001$. When eighth grade students matriculated into ninth grade, those who were assigned a Graduate Advocate the year before had fewer dropouts, $\chi^2 = 341.8$, $p < 0.001$. Ninth grade students who matriculated into tenth grade also had significantly fewer dropouts in their group than those who were not assigned an advocate, $\chi^2 = 95.6$, $p < 0.001$.

An interesting pattern occurred when looking at those who dropped out by their On Track designation. For students who dropped out in the first year, 57% were classified as At Risk, but only 9.8% were classified as Watch. One-third of those who dropped out (33.3%) were classified as not being at risk. In the second year, the pattern is similar, 36.2% of those who dropped out were classified as At Risk and 40.1% were classified as Watch. However, 47.7% of those who dropped out in the second year were classified as Not at Risk.

Table 4

Number of dropouts by On Track designation and advocate assignment

	Advocate Year						Following Year					
	Advocate			No Advocate			Advocate			No Advocate		
	On	Watch	Risk	On	Watch	Risk	On	Watch	Risk	On	Watch	Risk
8 th 2009	2	2	36	34	7	39	14	29	204	562	160	141
9 th 2009	10	8	130	117	31	76	56	58	382	531	156	157
8 th 2010	0	0	0	0	0	4	3	25	200	539	157	119
9 th 2010	12	56	235	343	125	144	12	53	237	334	123	135

Attendance

When examining attendance rates, students with Graduate Advocates had fewer absences. In the first cohort, students with Graduate Advocates had fewer unexcused ($t_{(9521.65)} = 33.42, p < .001$) and excused absences ($t_{(9948.89)} = 14.80, p < .001$) than those without the Graduate Advocate in the first year. In the second year, there were no statistically significant differences. When looking at the two years combined as an analysis of covariance there was no difference between the groups. In the second cohort there were no differences in absences between students with Graduate Advocates and students without.

Discipline

While looking at discipline related outcomes, students with a Graduate Advocate had significantly more disciplinary incidents. In both years students with Graduate Advocates had more Required Parent Conferences and suspensions. Students with Graduate Advocates in the first year of implementation also had significantly more expulsions; while in the second year there were no differences in the number of expulsions between the two groups. Differences can be seen in Table 5. The differences between the two groups for students disappeared as they were tracked through the second year. Analysis of covariance was applied to Required Parent Conferences ($F_{(1, 1831)} = 0.93$, n.s.), suspensions ($F_{(1, 1124)} = 0.81$, n.s.), and expulsions ($F_{(1, 83)} = 1.00$, n.s.) for students who participated in the first year.

Table 5

Mean disciplinary actions for students with and without Graduate Advocates during the year advocates were assigned

	Graduate Advocate	No Graduate Advocate	t value
Conferences 2009	1.27	1.13	4.11*
Suspensions 2009	1.06	.85	5.86*
Expulsions 2009	.02	.03	2.87*
Conferences 2010	1.73	1.29	11.03*
Suspensions 2010	.72	.52	6.57*
Expulsions 2010	.05	.04	1.73

Achievement

Looking at the effects of the Graduate Advocate Program on student achievement, the results are mixed. The GAP program did not improve student GPA across two years for students in the first year. For the second year of GAP, student GPA was significantly better for those who were assigned Graduate Advocates than those who did not receive advocates (ANCOVA $F_{(2, 44373)} = 71.58, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$). Students classified as being On Track and Watch were significantly better. There was no statistical difference between groups within the At Risk classification.

Table 6

Grade point average for students with and without graduate advocates in the second year (2010/2011)

Classification	Graduate Advocate	No Advocate
On Track	1.95	1.73
Watch	1.93	1.52
At Risk	1.67	1.68

As for eighth grade CRT scores, the results are also mixed. For eighth grade students in either year, students assigned a graduate advocate did not perform as well as those without a graduate advocate in the CRT Reading or Mathematics assessments.

Conclusions

It appears that the GAP program was successful at reducing the number of dropouts. This effect was greatest for eighth grade students and during the year students were assigned an advocate. Lacking an advocate in the following year increased the likelihood of dropping out. The GAP program effectiveness appears to have been related to attendance, since attendance was significantly better for students with advocates.

The Graduate Advocate Program was not effective as a deterrent. Students with advocates had greater Required Parent Teacher conferences and suspensions. The effects of the GAP program on

expulsions were mixed. The effects on student achievement were also mixed. Graduate Advocates perceived that the program would not act as a deterrent for discipline issues. They may have been correct. The alternative may be that this was a self-fulfilling prophecy, where results followed expectations. Advocates did not expect discipline issues to improve and they did not. It is difficult to say which interpretation is correct without additional research.

There is some evidence from the second year that student GPA improved when a student advocate was assigned. The second year may represent revisions made at the school level to improve. Academic achievement was the biggest thrust of the GAP program. Many advocates said the academic focus was on credit retrieval and a greater focus on content instruction. However, perceptions were that academic achievement was not being addressed sufficiently. Additionally, other aspects such as goal orientation towards graduation and study skills instruction were not consistently taught across participating schools.

The accuracy of the prediction model used to identify potential dropouts needs refining. It may be suggested from this initial analysis that graduate advocate teams were more accurate in identifying students at risk for dropping out. Further the initial examination of dropouts was that this model did not accurately identify which students would drop out. Of those who dropped out of school, 38.7% were classified as At Risk, while 42.4% were classified as On Track to graduate. The prediction model should be re-evaluated to identify and include additional factors, such as race/ethnicity and gender, to refine the identification process for southern Nevada students. Further, advocates' concern that the data model used to identify potential participants was intimidating and overwhelming should be addressed.