

Service as a Strategy:

GRADUATION COACHES

a service blueprint

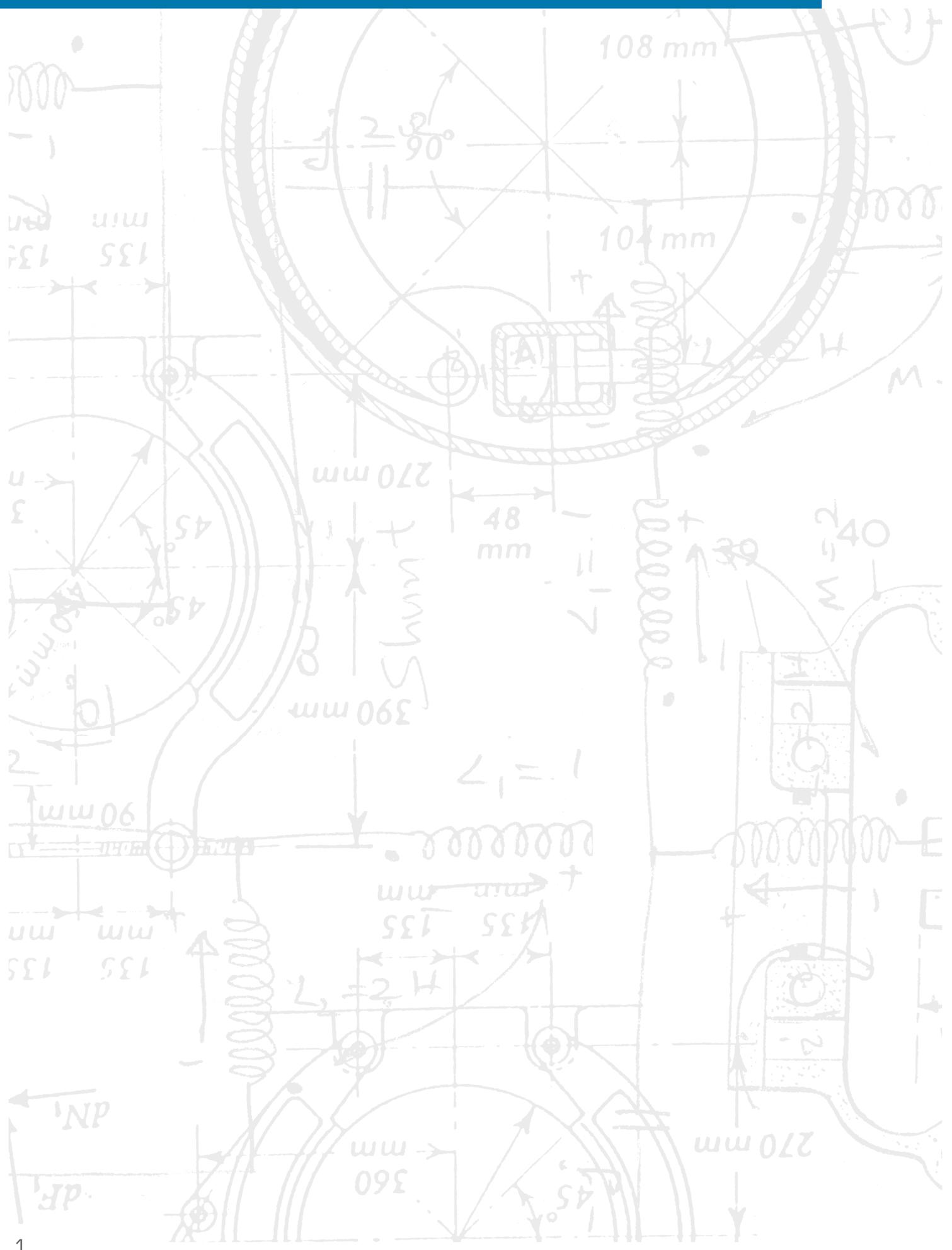
IMPACT AREA:
education & youth

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GRADUATION COACHES

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Making use of his or her bully pulpit, the mayor calls for volunteers to become coaches to help the young people in their lives graduate from high school, get into college, and plan for a career. Unlike traditional mentors, these adult Graduation Coaches build on relationships they already have with youth, engaging them in conversations about their future at critical moments and offering guidance to help them find the information they need. The mayor's office and its partners arm these coaches with information to pass along, as well as training in how to have these conversations in a way that will make a difference – ultimately contributing to the academic success of these youth.

BACKGROUND

The dropout rate is a problem of epidemic proportions, with a quarter of all public high school students failing to graduate with their class. High dropout rates don't only limit opportunities for these young people – they also have a dramatic impact on communities. Raising the graduation rate has been shown to decrease teen parenthood, criminal behavior, and reliance on government-funded healthcare, food stamps and housing assistance while increasing earnings and home ownership.¹ According to one estimate, increasing the graduation rate by 1,000 students generates a net benefit of \$268 million over a lifetime.²

¹The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools." Alliance for Excellent Education, August 10th 2009. Online: <http://bit.ly/hAjp6p>. And: "The Economic Benefits of Reducing the Dropout Rate Among Students of Color in the Nation's Largest Metropolitan Areas." Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010. Online: <http://bit.ly/ftSHpB>.

²Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, Andrew Sum with Sheila Palma. (December 2007). The Fiscal Consequences of Adult Educational Attainment. Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University. Sponsored by the National Commission on Adult Literacy. <http://www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/content/fiscalimpact.pdf>

(BACKGROUND CONTINUED)

There are numerous factors that affect a city’s overall graduation rate and levels of academic achievement. Increased parental and adult involvement is one factor that has been shown to have a positive impact on students’ educational achievement regardless of family income or background – yet there are few interventions in place to strengthen the bonds between young people and caring adults that are also specifically organized to promote educational success. According to the Connecticut Academy for Education and Mathematics and the Michigan Department of Education, parental and adult involvement has a positive effect on children’s achievement even when the influence of background factors such as socioeconomic status, social class and family size have been taken into account.^{3,4} Graduation Coaches is designed to strengthen these bonds and motivate and prepare caring adults to help young people set positive education and career goals – contributing to improvements in academics and life skills, and ultimately helping youth graduate from high school.⁵ The first volunteer Graduation Coach initiative to utilize these principles was developed and launched in Philadelphia in September 2010 as part of Mayor Michael A. Nutter’s commitment to raising education achievement in the city.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS

1 Mayor’s office and its partners assemble resources for the initiative including the training curriculum, well-prepared trainers, materials, and training venues.

2 Volunteers participate in Graduation Coach training workshops to learn what conversations are important to have and what resources are available, based on the young person’s age, and identify the students they will coach.

3 CONNverge is facilitated by the CT Academy for Education in Mathematics, Science & Technology Inc. “Student Engagement and Learning Responsibility Facts” Link: <http://bit.ly/qHbAAJ>
 4 Michigan Department of Education’s “What Research Says About Parent Involvement in Children’s Education In Relation to Academic Achievement,” March 2002.
 5 Research on the effects of mentoring – similar to the role that Graduation Coaches play for the youth in their lives – shows that mentoring is associated with improvements in academics, decreases in risky behaviors, and an overall enhancement of social and emotional development. One source shows that mentees whose matches last 9-12 months or more show significant increases in measures of self-worth, perceived social acceptance, perceived academic competence, school value, and decreases in both drug and alcohol use. See <http://bit.ly/nRYAib>

(REQUIRED ELEMENTS CONTINUED)

3 Mayor's office oversees the creation of a system that allows coaches to pledge their commitment and report interactions with the youth they coach, as well as individual student outcomes.

4 Volunteers provide regular coaching (at least four hours per month, ideally across multiple sessions) to one or more young people, developing their coaching skills by drawing on the initiative's materials and methods as well as the city's community of Graduation Coaches.

5 Impact metrics are tracked and reported across the population of Graduation Coaches.

Required metrics include:

- Number of workshops held and number of workshop participants
- Number of coaches who are consistently involved with at least one student, for one year or more
- Number of students who are coached for at least four hours per month, across multiple sessions, for one year or more⁶
- Short-term student outcomes (e.g., attendance, behavior, classroom performance)

Additional optional metrics include:

- Estimated impact of the coaching conversations, per coach feedback/surveys
- Long-term student outcomes (e.g., grade advancement, graduation rate)
- Rankings of the most valuable parts of the workshops and the resource library
- Number of coaches recruited by other coaches

The way these metrics are tracked will differ depending on the way in which the program and tracking system is structured; see the Measuring Impact section for more details.

⁶ Four hours per month – or weekly contact on average – has been shown to drive successful outcomes. While this will be measured on a one-year basis, multi-year relationships are encouraged in order for the relationship/guidance to have the most impact on the youth, based on the experience of existing mentoring programs.

EXECUTING GRADUATION COACHES

CHOOSING THE TARGET AREA AND SETTING A GOAL

The mayor's office chooses whether the initiative will be focused broadly or narrowly across the city's population. For example, the program can span the entire city, serve a high school and its feeder schools, target a single neighborhood, or be limited to the area served by a particular community-based organization. Picking an ambitious but achievable goal can be useful in making the call to action. For example, the mayor's office may aim for the number of young people being coached to match the number of middle and high school students who are statistically likely to drop out of targeted schools. Further, working with a broader or narrower population can affect how metrics are collected (see the Measuring Impact section).

ENLISTING PARTNERS

Partners both in and outside of city government can play a critical role in recruiting Graduation Coaches and managing the trainings. One set of "anchor" partners might be responsible for managing the trainings on a regular basis. These partners can help provide trainers (see section on Preparing Trainers) as well as logistical support. They may commit to offer a certain number of trainings (e.g., twice a month) and arrange for or offer their own facilities (such as civic organizations, community or recreation centers, libraries, businesses, community-based nonprofits, hotels and conference centers, educational institutions, and places of worship). The ideal anchor partner is an organization that can manage the event production by providing some or all of the necessary equipment, supplies, and refreshments.

Other partners may help by recruiting or arranging for individuals to be trained as Graduation Coaches. Faith congregations, businesses, service fraternities or sororities, civic associations, volunteer groups, parent associations, and other groups of adults with ties to targeted youth are good sources. These partners may also help establish communication channels with the coaches to enable metrics tracking.

CREATING A SYSTEM TO TRACK PLEDGES AND COMMUNICATE WITH COACHES

The mayor's office and its partners must determine how volunteers will sign up to be coaches, register for Graduation Coach workshops, and identify and share the progress of their students. The initiative leads should also establish a process for ongoing communication with coaches and metrics tracking. If specific schools are targeted, it may be possible to use the school website to sign up coaches and school data to measure outcomes. However, if the effort is more diffuse – e.g., across the whole city – a new website may be a better strategy. Minimal custom programming should be required to create a website that performs these functions automatically.

PREPARING TRAINERS TO LEAD GRADUATION COACH WORKSHOPS

Graduation Coach workshops, designed to train volunteers as coaches, are the cornerstone of this effort. The mayor's office, together with its partners, develops a curriculum, compiles a library of resources for trainers and coaches, and identifies trainers who will deliver the workshops.

1. Develop the workshop curriculum and incorporate locally relevant material. The goal of the Graduation Coach training curriculum is to provide Graduation Coach trainers with material that will help them:
 - a. motivate prospective Graduation Coaches to help their young people graduate from high school and pursue higher education;
 - b. provide guidance on what conversations are important to have with young people at different stages in their educational journey; and
 - c. suggest tips on how to have those conversations effectively.

Most of the curricula developed by existing Graduation Coach initiatives in other cities are applicable in all locales (see Resources section for more information), but the data on graduation rates and other elements of the call to action will be most effective if they include information specific to the target area. Once a draft curriculum has been developed, a set of trainers should be identified to test it so refinements can be made if necessary.

2. Create a library of online resources with locally relevant material. The goal of the online resource library is to give volunteer coaches a directory of all information they may need to support a young person to achieve in high school, graduate, and get to and through college. This information can range from afterschool activities that support youth development to college financial aid and application assistance.

(PREPARING TRAINERS CONTINUED)

As with the curriculum, resources that other cities have developed are a useful starting point (see the Resources section for more information), but the mayor's office will need to add a set of resources that are specific to the target area, the city and the surrounding region. The materials and advice of local teachers, guidance counselors, and youth-focused nonprofits can provide a good starting place for this information.

3. Recruit volunteer trainers to deliver the workshops. Trainers who deliver the workshops ideally will be affiliated with anchor partners, although some may come from other sources. Useful groups to approach with a request for volunteer trainers include small to mid-size businesses, the human resources departments of large organizations, teachers, professors, workforce development nonprofits, training contractors, and community organizers. Helpful qualities to look for in trainers include experience delivering other kinds of training, experience as parents of teens who went on to college, social sensitivity, cultural knowledge and connection to the target community, long-term commitment, and proximity to one or more of the venues.

It may be that most trainers will volunteer only for short periods or will have infrequent availability, in which case the mayor's office may find it helpful to maintain a large pool to call upon to ensure broad coverage (i.e., some available during the workday, others in evenings, others on weekends). Ideally – if funding allows – the mayor's office provides a small stipend for the trainers, which can be helpful for attracting trainers with more experience to become more deeply involved. If the mayor's office is unable to provide a stipend to keep volunteers engaged, cities should consider tapping a single organization to lead this part of the initiative to increase accountability – which will help provide a steady stream of qualified and committed volunteer trainers.

The volunteer trainers need to be trained to deliver the workshops and supported in their efforts. A “train the trainer” system may be necessary if the goal is to reach a large number of Graduation Coaches. Those enlisted to “train the trainer” may sit in on trainings to provide feedback to trainers. Written evaluations (either administered at the site or online) can help trainers improve their delivery.

RECRUITING GRADUATION COACHES

Once the resource library and workshop planning are complete, the mayor's office and its local partners promote the initiative to the adults of the target area. Useful avenues for reaching caring adults include school open houses, civic group meetings, block parties, religious gatherings, local business association gatherings, parenting center events, and community center events. Local partners (e.g., a local nonprofit that focuses on youth engagement or businesses with multiple stores or branches) can be particularly helpful in recruiting coaches and may follow outreach strategies that include: use of marketing materials such as posters or brochures; word-of-mouth communication with the help of local leaders; presenting to community organizations; use of mass media outlets; email outreach; and presence at local events (e.g., information tables at a community fair). All of these strategies should be tailored to the interests and characteristics of the desired Graduation Coach population (e.g., being present at locations frequented by the targeted population).

If the initiative is focused on recruiting Graduation Coaches from diverse communities, there are some specific strategies that could be helpful in recruiting mentors from those groups, as listed below.⁷

- Develop connections to ethnic, religious, social, fraternal and professional organizations. They can help identify people in the community who might be willing to be coaches and lend their credibility to a program.
- Create an advisory committee, including members who are leaders with respect from and influence in the community from which you are trying to recruit coaches, who can encourage and challenge people to support the initiative.
- Ensure that marketing efforts are linguistically and culturally responsive. Hold meetings and presentations in familiar locations; greet potential coaches at the door to help build personal relationships.
- Collaborate with existing programs to gain entry into the community. Working with established organizations may help get buy in from community members.
- Use media outlets that appeal to the targeted group of potential coaches. Such outlets may include ethnic or community newspapers and smaller radiostations playing a particular genre of music or broadcasting in the primary language of the group from which you are trying to recruit.

CONDUCTING GRADUATION COACH WORKSHOPS

The training workshops offer caring adults who respond to the mayor's call to action a greater understanding of the dropout epidemic, stronger motivation to make a difference with the young people they care about, and the guidance necessary to increase their effectiveness as coaches. That guidance comes in two forms: (1) what conversations are important to have, and (2) what resources to use when giving advice, each customized for the young person's age.

A key challenge in delivering these workshops is that parents may comprise a portion of those who respond to the call, and parenting style can be a sensitive topic. It is therefore important for trainers to present the initiative's guidance as a set of resources that the participants may find useful in helping the young people they care for, and avoid any discussion of parenting styles.

To run the workshops, the mayor's office and its partners play a coordinating role that brings together participants and trainers, along with the materials and supplies they need (such as resource materials, a PowerPoint presentation and projector, and refreshments). As the timing and needs of each target community can vary, it may be useful to set up a short series of workshops that immediately follow the initiative launch and then schedule further workshops on an as-needed basis. Annual days of service, such as MLK Day, may be a good time to offer workshops.

SUPPORTING GRADUATION COACHES ON AN ONGOING BASIS

Given that coaching relationships are likely to be most impactful when they include at least four hours of coaching across multiple sessions each month, for a year or more,⁸ it is important to provide ongoing support to help volunteer coaches stay informed and engaged. After coaches have completed the workshop training, the mayor's office and its partners support them going forward by helping them get answers to their questions, support one another, and stay engaged. This can be done through a "frequently asked questions" page online, organizing periodic social mixers for coaches where there is also a Q&A session, providing periodic news and answers to questions on the website or a blog, creating a Facebook page for the initiative, answering questions directly by phone or email, and running an email list for coaches to raise questions and share their stories.

⁸ Spreading coaching interactions over the course of the month is likely to be more impactful than a 4-hour monthly session. In addition, multi-year relationships are encouraged in order for the relationship/guidance to have the most impact on the youth, based on the experience of existing mentoring programs, which provide similar support and guidance to that offered by Graduation Coaches. See: <http://bit.ly/nvgssw>

MEASURING IMPACT

Tracking and reporting metrics are essential for the initiative to demonstrate impact and prove its value to the community.

Required metrics include:

- Number of workshops held and number of workshop participants
- Number of coaches who are consistently involved with at least one student, for one year or more
- Number of students who are coached for at least four hours per month, across multiple sessions, for one year or more⁶
- Short-term student outcomes (e.g., attendance, behavior, classroom performance)

Additional optional metrics include:

- Estimated impact of the coaching conversations, per coach feedback/surveys
- Long-term student outcomes (e.g., grade advancement, graduation rate)
- Rankings of the most valuable parts of the workshops and the resource library
- Number of coaches recruited by other coaches

Depending on the system used to sign up and communicate with coaches, these metrics may be tracked through an interactive website, regular online surveys, phone interviews with coaches, school data, or a combination of these strategies.

SECURING RESOURCES

Graduation Coach initiatives can be attractive to donors concerned about education in the local community. Depending on the scale and targeting of the effort, required resources may include staff support; website development, hosting, and management; stipends for trainers; printing; and refreshments for workshop participants. If these resources cannot be provided in-kind or through city funds, local funders can be approached to support the effort. Potential sources of funding and in-kind donations include: large local employers, local foundations, individual donors, marketing firms, food and drink vendors, print shops, graphic design firms, web design firms, and advertising agencies.

⁶ Four hours per month – or weekly contact on average – has been shown to drive successful outcomes. While this will be measured on a one-year basis, multi-year relationships are encouraged in order for the relationship/guidance to have the most impact on the youth, based on the experience of existing mentoring programs.

(SECURING RESOURCES CONTINUED)

The elements of a typical proposal include:

- Description of Graduation Coaches
- Information on how this initiative will positively impact the community (e.g., the value of increasing adult involvement and the ultimate improvement in student achievement or graduation rates)
- The amount of funding requested, proposed breakdown of grant(s) and how those funds will be used (e.g., paying for supplies or providing a stipend to the trainers)
- The metrics that will be collected to assess progress
- Information on Cities of Service (this is especially helpful for national funders)
- Description of how the donor will be recognized (this could include putting logos on printed materials or your service or initiative website if you have one, verbal thanks in the training session, etc.)

The mayor's office can work with its partners to recognize donors and provide follow-up information on the initiative's implementation and impact.

RECOGNIZING AND THANKING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer recognition is an effective recruitment and retention tool. Recognition not only motivates volunteers, but also promotes public awareness in local communities and builds a sense of community within and amongst the coaches. To recognize Graduation Coach volunteers, honor the coaches in a way that will resonate with the target community. Local community-based leaders or organizers involved in the initiative can help determine what forms of recognition will be most meaningful for the particular group(s) in question. Some methods to consider are thanks and recognition from the mayor at a community event, a written thank you note with statistics on the impact of the program to date, a thank you to coaches in a newsletter, or discounts at local retail businesses provided by project sponsors. The mayor's office may also want to recognize the volunteer trainers, as many likely invest a great deal of personal effort into the initiative. In general, the more this recognition can create cachet around being part of the Graduation Coach community, the better it will be for recruitment and retention efforts.

OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

ADD CAPACITY WITH A TEAM OR A LEAD PARTNER

The mayor's office may decide that it needs more than its in-house capacity for preparing and launching the initiative at the desired scale. In that instance, it can be useful to assemble a team to act both as advisors and executors for portions of the work, and – ideally – assign one lead non-profit partner to spearhead the effort. This lead partner would make the Graduation Coaches initiative central to its work and would be responsible for execution citywide (e.g., this lead partner may be the same anchor partner mentioned earlier in the enlisting partners section). In either instance, the mayor's office will still elevate the issue by making public calls to action, provide high-level oversight and guidance, help partners connect to public and private resources, and recognize those involved. Key capabilities to look for in these team members include expertise in training, marketing and outreach, or curriculum design, networks in the target community, and networks that include potential donors or supporters. Based on the experience of Philadelphia's Graduation Coach initiative, the total capacity required will likely range from approximately two full-time employees (FTEs) for a large city-wide initiative to half of an FTE for smaller-scale initiatives. Local colleges and universities, as well as interns, can also help expand capacity.

START WITH PILOT WORKSHOPS

The mayor's office may decide to hold “pilot” workshops before launching a full-fledged roll out, to ensure that the city and its partners have developed a high-quality, relevant training for participating volunteers. This allows key stakeholders to provide input and evaluation that can improve the workshops as well as generate additional buy-in from those organizations or individuals. Some cities, such as Chula Vista, CA use pilot workshops to test the ideal number of attendees for each session (no more than 25 per workshop was shown to provide a quality, interactive experience) and to ensure that the workshops were polished before launching a major promotional campaign for the Graduation Coaches initiative.

GRADUATION COACHES IN ACTION

SERVE PHILADELPHIA

Following a nine month research and planning period, the first Graduation Coach initiative was launched in Philadelphia in fall 2010 as part of Mayor Michael A. Nutter's commitment to raising educational achievement in the city, with the goal of increasing high school graduation to 80% by 2015 and doubling the percentage of college graduates from 18% to 36% by 2018. During his first two years in office, Mayor Nutter instituted a range of strategic policy initiatives aimed at building the organizational infrastructure required to centrally address these goals. The mayor's Graduation Coach Campaign complements these initiatives by providing a clear role for every Philadelphian to play in increasing high school graduation and college attainment rates.

Philadelphia's Graduation Coach Campaign was initially created in close partnership with the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN). Additionally, representatives from the following organizations contributed substantially to the development of the Campaign's mission and infrastructure: Big Brothers Big Sisters, the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and Nu Sigma Youth Services, Inc.

During the planning phase and first year of implementation, a Graduation Coach Campaign Director was loaned from PYN to coordinate the entire effort. The Director was supported by a full-time AmeriCorps VISTA member and a working group comprised of the mayor's Chief Service Officer, the Deputy Education Officer and Policy Assistant in the Mayor's Office of Education, and representatives from United Way and Nu Sigma Youth Services, Inc. In year two, the Mayor's Office of Education will fully implement the Graduation Coach Campaign under the umbrella of the mayor's PhillyGoes2College initiative.

In year one, Philadelphia successfully raised funds to pay an annual stipend of \$1,500 to each of its nine anchor partners, offer \$75 per workshop to its facilitators, and pay for workshop supplies, commercially printed materials, refreshments and pins, for a total cost of \$200-250 per workshop. Following the initiative launch in September 2010, 98 workshops were held, training more than 1,500 individuals to serve as Graduation Coaches by July 2011.

(SERVE PHILADELPHIA CONTINUED)

Four key lessons learned from the implementation to-date are:

- Be ambitious, but realistic, about what you can achieve in the first year. For example, consider focusing on a specific geographic zone to avoid spreading your resources too thin.
- Have one person be responsible for tracking all moving parts and hold ultimate accountability, though it is best for that person to take a collaborative stance in leading the group.
- As there are many steps required to design and implement Graduation Coaches, invest time prior to the launch and throughout the first year of implementation to plan and build infrastructure critical to long-term success.
- Make sure the resource library is high quality – most workshop participants display ample motivation and find the most valuable element to be the resource library.

CHULA VISTA SERVES

The first replication of Graduation Coaches started in Chula Vista, California in May 2011. Overseeing a small border city with a 55% Latino population, a severe budget crisis, and a dropout rate of 14%, Chula Vista Mayor Cheryl Cox – a former educator – decided to address the issue after a statewide mayoral movement to improve graduation rates. Without city funding, the mayor's Chief Service Officer spent between 10% and 25% of her time assembling and managing a cross-sectoral working group to launch the initiative with the goal of training 5,000 coaches for the approximately 5,000 enrolled students between 10 and 19 years of age who were at risk of dropping out.

With few sources for funding in the city, Chula Vista adapted the Philadelphia curriculum, recruited an all-volunteer set of workshop facilitators (including some who speak Spanish), and is asking the workshop hosts and initiative sponsors to provide the necessary materials. The Chief Service Officer has also created two teams of external support to provide additional capacity: a curriculum committee comprised of educators experienced in curriculum design, and a marketing committee that is creating targeted messaging for community outreach. This approach has been met with a strong positive response from organizations and members of the public.

While the initiative is still young, one key lesson learned from the team's preparations to-date is that there are few other efforts aimed at working with, educating, and preparing the adults who care for young people rather than trying to reach the young people directly. This unique characteristic can be leveraged to engage as many Graduation Coaches as possible.

RESOURCES

- The Philadelphia Graduation Coach Campaign: <http://www.phillygradcoaches.org>
- The national campaign Building a Grad Nation: <http://bit.ly/iLj8G5>
- For a shared folder that provides access to materials from other cities' initiatives (e.g., curriculum, resource library) and sharing any materials created by your local initiative, please contact Cities of Service at info@citiesofservice.org.
- User-friendly free tools to consider using for building the website:
 - o WordPress.com and Tumblr.com for a public discussion on a blog
 - o SurveyMonkey and Google Forms for taking sign-up requests and pledging to be a coach
 - o WikiSpaces.com for giving coaches a shared "corkboard" for posting useful resources
 - o Google Groups, Yahoo! Groups, and Facebook Groups for ongoing conversation among the coaches
 - o Drupal or Joomla for setting up more complex custom websites with advanced functionality

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