

Coaching Philadelphia Students to Success

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Summary

Philadelphia's Mayor Michael Nutter has always been a strong and vocal advocate for education reform in the city. Since taking office, he has made it a priority of his administration, with the goal of increasing the college attainment and high school graduation rates. In 2007, only 53% of Philadelphia high school students graduated on time and only 18% held an undergraduate college degree (Mayor's Office of Education 2010).

Part of the city's efforts to foster a more educated city and ensure prosperity for everyone was the establishment of the Graduation Coach Campaign, an initiative of the Mayor's Office of Education. The Campaign is an effort to engage adults and give them the necessary tools to become positive influences in the students' academic lives. Adult volunteers are trained to become "Coaches" and are given resources designed to help students achieve success in high school and after graduation. The program provides vital services to adults seeking guidance and opens a supportive line of communication for students in need.

The Graduation Coach Campaign (GCC) was founded on the belief that education is the key to success and that everyone can play a role in helping youth succeed. To date, they have trained over 4,600 coaches in the city, and the potential impact of this program is incredible. Because it relies heavily on volunteer efforts, operating costs are low and the financial return is significant. This benefits not only the students working with Coaches but society as a whole. Additionally, the influence that a positive role model can have on the life of a young person is priceless. Beyond helping students do well in school, mentors can be a very powerful tool in enhancing a person's quality of life.

The GCC is at a critical turning point right now. Since launching three years ago, they have gained powerful insight into the impact of their program, and careful analysis has informed a new strategy to be implemented in fall 2013. With the Philadelphia School District facing daily battles and little hope on the horizon, it has become even more critical to make strides towards changing the education landscape. The Campaign hopes that with its services, more progress can be made in improving educational outcomes for the city's youth.

The Problem

Education is a critical tool for achieving success in life. When a student does not graduate high school, there are personal, social and economic consequences. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, students without a high school diploma are “far more likely than graduates to spend their lives periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system” (2011). On the other hand, high school graduates are better equipped for life and provide both social and economic benefits to society.

In Philadelphia, there is a significant dropout problem that the city cannot afford to ignore. In 2007, a staggering 45% of students dropped out of high school (Mayor’s Office of Education, 2010). Though the city’s numbers have improved since then—the high school graduation rate reached 64% in 2013 (Mayor’s Office of Education 2013) — progress is still needed. On a recent annual report that lists Pennsylvania’s low-achieving schools, the Philadelphia School District makes up 44% of that list (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013).

Much of Michael Nutter’s mayoral campaign in 2007 was driven by his desire to remedy this situation. Therefore, he took office in 2008 on the promise that education reform would be a top priority of his administration and set out to accomplish two clearly defined goals. First, he committed to doubling the college attainment rate from 18% to 36% by 2018. The second aim was to significantly increase the high school graduation rate, from 57% in

2008 to 80% by 2015. Because Nutter has limited influence over the Philadelphia School District, which has been under state control since 2002, this was no doubt a challenging task.

The Solution

In order to make progress toward these ambitious goals, Mayor Nutter established the Mayor's Office of Education in the week after his inauguration. The Office of Education strives to bring together key players in Philadelphia who work together to improve the city's education landscape. Because they have no direct authority over the schools, the aim of the office is to influence collaboration among different stakeholders, who hail from K-12 schools, the nonprofit sector, the business community, and higher education. Additionally, the office has established several initiatives with the aim of increasing access to information, resources and support systems. The Graduation Coach Campaign is one such initiative.

The GCC is the adult intervention strategy to increase college attainment.. The idea for the Campaign was initially launched in 2010 as part of the Cities of Service coalition, a national movement that supports mayors in their efforts to engage citizens in a volunteer capacity. It was incubated at the Philadelphia Youth Network and in 2011, it transitioned to the Mayor's Office of Education to allow for shared resources and information. The GCC

currently operates under the umbrella of the PhillyGoes2College initiative, which is a resource and referral center that aims to establish a college-bound culture in Philadelphia.

The GCC is also trying to effect a cultural shift. Its ultimate goal is to bring about cultural change by shifting attitudes and influencing behavior so that all Philadelphians play a role in helping the city's youth succeed. The initiative achieves this by educating adults and giving them the tools they need to help students earn a high school and college diploma. It is not a matching program that pairs adults with students; it is a program that is designed to help adults identify and provide encouragement to students they already know. Through recruitment and training, the GCC's objective is to empower adults in Philadelphia to assist students and drive them towards success both in school and after graduation.

Why Coaches? The school system alone cannot ensure educational success for everyone, and it is unreasonable to expect that. That is where the role of a Coach comes in. Coaching can be a powerful tool and often leads to positive educational, social and psychological outcomes. Thus, the GCC is hoping to create a city of Coaches who will help youth achieve their educational goals. They are leveraging the capacity of volunteers and tapping into the power of community to change the course for Philadelphia's youth.

How It Works

Adults of any age are able to participate in the program. To become a Graduation Coach, prospective Coaches must first participate in a free, 90-minute, in-person workshop. They also receive *The Playbook*, a guidebook that discusses strategies for working with youth at any age, from middle school through college, to keep them on track towards graduation. This guide provides a range of information including sample conversation starters, information on high school application deadlines and the early warning indicators for a high school dropout. Conveniently, it's available in both English and Spanish.

The training workshops typically take place at one of the Campaign's anchor agencies, an important aspect of the program's model. Anchor agencies are community-based organizations that host training workshops and serve as regional resource hubs for adults seeking information. From a logistics standpoint, these partners are necessary because hosting all of the training workshops in Center City is simply not feasible. These organizations are also crucial because they help spread the word and promote the efforts of the Campaign, and they are largely responsible for the recruitment of Coaches. Identifying partners who can work collaboratively towards the same goal is an important factor to ensure success for the GCC. Past anchor agencies have included Catholic Social Services,

Congreso de Latinos Unidos, Diversified Community Services, EducationWorks, Mothers in Charge, the Salvation Army of Greater Philadelphia and the Women's Christian Alliance.

In addition to The Playbook and the training workshops, the campaign's website serves as an important tool. There one can find timelines for students to help keep them on the right track, lists of after-school services and locations of writing centers in the city, among other things. The PhillyGoes2College website also provides a vast amount of information for the Coaches.

There are currently many organizations in Philadelphia working to improve outcomes for the city's youth. Considering the ongoing struggles within the school district, it is not surprising that the community is actively working to impact the educational landscape. However, the GCC is unique in its approach of specifically targeting the adult community. Thus far, they have been able to train an impressive amount of Coaches.

- Number of workshops held year to date: 380
- Number of workshops held September 2012 to July 2013: 88
- Number of coaches trained to date: 4,666
- Number of coaches trained September 2012 to July 2013: 769

These numbers seem to indicate that the work they are

doing is desired and fulfills a need in the community.

Current Challenges

The Mayor's Office of Education and the GCC initiative have set high expectations for the impact of their work. However, as with most organizations in the early years of development and growth, the first two years of the program presented several challenges.

Recruiting

Though they play a crucial part in the execution of the Campaign, the anchor agencies struggle with recruitment. In the program's current model, they are expected to do the majority of the recruiting. Unfortunately, this has simply been difficult for many of the organizations. They don't have the means to meet the requirements, and it is becoming burdensome to participate in the program.

Training

The GCC has received feedback that the training workshop is not as effective as they hoped it would be. Because Coaches come from different backgrounds with different sets of expectations, the training does not speak to everyone. Some Coaches find it too rigid and not necessarily applicable to them. For example, some adults approach the Campaign seeking specific information about getting into college. They know that college is the right path for their student and just need help getting there. Other adults may not have that same expectation;

they may simply be trying to help their student stay in high school. Because these Coaches are coming to the Campaign with different understandings but receiving the same prescribed packet of information, all elements of the training may not be relevant.

Engaging Coaches

Staying in touch with the adults they train has been one of the biggest difficulties of the Campaign thus far. The GCC maintains contact with the Coaches through monthly newsletters, giveaway incentives and periodic networking events that connect them with other Coaches. However, they have realized that these methods are not engaging the Coaches deeply enough; the level of contact post-workshop has been underwhelming. Once the training is over, it is very hard to sustain open lines of communication and remain involved in the coaching process.

In summer 2011, the GCC conducted a research project to determine how effective they had been at influencing coaches' behavior. They used online surveys and held focus groups to gain feedback on the program and determine how they could further support the efforts of their Coaches. Several helpful findings were discovered through this project regarding the usefulness of certain specific resources. Perhaps most importantly, though, only 13% of trained Coaches returned the survey. This indicates that though they have participated in a training workshop, they do not feel strongly connected to

the Campaign.

Data Collection & Evaluation

Because there is a lack of Coach engagement, there are larger data collection and evaluation challenges. Ideally, the GCC would like to collect student data from the Coaches: student names, grades and schools. This information could be passed on to the Philadelphia School District, who would then be able to tell what percentage of that list graduated. However, without dependable communication from the Coaches, they have been unable to obtain this information. That of course leads to difficulty when it comes to evaluation. If they did have this information, they would be able to track whether or not their intervention was having an influence on graduation rates. Right now, though, measuring that level of impact is an obstacle. They do know how many Coaches the program is training each year, but they do not yet know how many of those Coaches are successfully driving students towards high school graduation.

The Future of the Campaign

Taking into account the above challenges, the GCC has developed a new strategy to be implemented in fall 2013. The future of the initiative will look quite different from its beginnings and has been informed by the agency's experiences and feedback from the Coaches and anchor agencies.

First, the GCC plans to increase city-wide messaging efforts to raise awareness and increase campaign brand recognition. As more Philadelphians become aware of the Campaign, the more successful it will be. This is necessary because their past marketing efforts have not been sufficient, as indicated by the fact that the anchor agencies have been struggling with recruitment. Establishing a strong brand will also make the program more sustainable in the long run.

A second step for the Campaign is to develop more effective communication tools. Because they have received feedback that the 90-minute training is long and not necessarily helpful to everyone, they need to edit the way that information is being given to the Coaches. Therefore, their new approach to training is going to be markedly different. The GCC is currently working on the creation of two- to three-minute videos that will be available directly on their website. These videos will communicate very specific pieces of information such as how to complete a FAFSA application, how to complete the common application and how to make productive connections at possible workplaces, among other things. They will enable adults to access just the information they need quickly and easily. An added bonus of this approach for the GCC is that by digitizing everything, they will be able to track how people are using their tools. Having this data will allow them to see which resources are working and which ones are not.

The GCC also understands that they need to design and implement better evaluation methods. The creation of the short online videos is one step in this direction. They are also currently consulting with a professional who has expertise in methodological research. This investigative process will assist them in the development and application of tools that will provide a reliable measure of Campaign effectiveness. Because data collection and evaluating impact have been challenges, taking a step back to remedy this problem is a smart decision for the organization.

In order to improve Coach recruitment, training and engagement, the GCC has plans to target social service systems. Parents who come through these systems could benefit greatly from the information that the Campaign provides. They are also going to focus campaign efforts on two high-need areas in the city. The theory behind this shift is that having an intense focus on a particular area will translate to a stronger impact in those communities. They also strongly believe that all students should be pushed to achieve regardless of their background.

In order to implement this transition, the GCC first enlisted a geographic information system intern to conduct extensive research on two selected neighborhoods: Strawberry Mansion and Kensington. This research provided them with a footprint of each neighborhood and showed them who the community players were. Having this information at the outset is important because it will

allow them to build more credibility and acceptance with the people who live there.

Finally, because of the shift to a neighborhood focus, the anchor agencies will play a new role in the future of the Campaign's model. The agencies will no longer be required to host the training workshops and recruit Coaches. They can still host training workshops, but only if they request to do so. They will continue to assist with the Campaign's marketing efforts, and some may have open office hours so that people in their communities can still have local access to information. Their new role is not as central to how the program is run; thereby relieving some of the burden they have felt in the past.

SROI

The GCC has the potential for a remarkable return on investment. The total operating budget of the program for one year is relatively low at only \$212,000. The financial impact of a high school diploma on one person's life, though, is significant. According to a study that analyzed the relationship between Philadelphians' educational level and their earnings, those who earn a high school diploma (or GED equivalent) are at a great advantage. They are more likely to gain steady employment, earn more income and contribute more to society. The chart below demonstrates the difference in earnings between high school graduates and dropouts.

Figure 1

The difference in annual earnings between a dropout and a graduate is \$9,774. The difference in that person's lifetime earnings is \$413,536. And when people attend some college or earn an associate's degree or bachelor's degree, those numbers only increase.

Knowing both the annual cost of the Campaign and how many Coaches were trained in the 2012–13 year, the potential impact of the GCC can then be quantified. For the purpose of this calculation, it is assumed that only 20% of students working with a Coach are in their final year of high school and on track for graduation. The calculation for the return on investment in one year of the program is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} & \mathbf{\$9,774} \text{ (difference between annual earnings)} \\ & \mathbf{\times 154} \text{ (20\% of coaches trained in 2012–13 year)} \\ & \mathbf{- \$212,000} \text{ (annual program budget)} \\ & \mathbf{= \$1,293,196} \text{ ROI} \end{aligned}$$

This is an impressive number and speaks highly of the possible impact of the Campaign.

Beyond the financial benefits of the GCC, the Campaign has other qualitative effects on students' lives. They gain a sense of pride from their accomplishments, feel motivated to take on greater challenges and become confident in their ability to succeed. Additionally, youth who have the experience of a positive mentor in their lives

will set an example for others. Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) has very clearly demonstrated the powerful effects of role models. After conducting an intensive study of their own program, findings revealed that children with a mentor demonstrated significant improvements in behavior. Fifty-two percent were less likely to skip school, and 37% were less likely to skip a class (Tierney, Grossman and Resch, 1995). Though the GCC is not as intensive as BBBS, it advocates the same theory that the role of a mentor can make a significant impact. The intervention of a caring adult who can drive a student to success has the potential to translate into better lives for the students, their families and their communities.

Conclusion

The GCC is at an important turning point right now in its development. This next year and the implementation of their newly developed strategy will be critical to the evolution of their model. In order to ensure positive outcomes, establishing a strong brand and implementing more effective processes are essential. With success, their intervention will educate and empower adults to be positive and influential role models for youth. This, in turn, will yield more students graduating from high school each year and finding success after graduation, whether in college or their chosen careers.

The fact that similar programs have been launched in

several other cities is encouraging. Philadelphia is not alone in its efforts to implement an adult volunteer initiative to drive student success. In Pittsburgh in 2013, Mayor Luke Ravenstahl established the Promise Coaches Campaign, using materials developed by the GCC to help inform their Campaign. The mayor of Chula Vista, California also launched a Graduation Coach Campaign in 2012 with the same goals as Philadelphia. And in Atlanta, the city's Communities in Schools program puts a graduation coach in the public high schools. In that model, the Coaches identify students at risk for dropping out and develop both academic and nonacademic services to get them back on track for graduation.

Additionally, Philadelphia is currently guiding other cities that are interested in implementing a graduation coaching campaign of their own. The GCC recently hosted a webinar that explained what aspects should be taken into consideration and what resources are required before launching this type of program. Their recommendations include determining the level of need, identifying potential partner organizations, establishing a timeline and developing evaluation criteria at the outset.

Another promising factor for the success of the Campaign is that Mayor Nutter considers it one of his significant education initiatives and is a champion for the program. Having his endorsement and backing has been a key factor in the Campaign's success because it gives GCC legitimacy and power in the education reform landscape.

They are able to leverage this power to promote the campaign and collaborate effectively with other organizations. And yet, with a new mayor taking office in 2015, there is guaranteed to be uncertainty regarding the future of the GCC in the long run.

At a time when Philadelphia's education system is struggling to stay afloat, the GCC is stepping in and filling a gap in the services provided by schools. Recent budget cuts to the district forced massive layoffs, and many schools find themselves without a guidance counselor on staff this year. Thus, the need for such a program is even greater. By equipping people with the right information and tapping into collaborative efforts, the Campaign is making students' chances for success more attainable. Fixing the dropout problem will not occur overnight, though; it is a complex problem involving many factors. However, with an enhanced strategy, the GCC is equipped to become a stronger positive force, expand its sphere of influence and impact a larger sector of the community.

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