

Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

Annual Implementation Report

Evaluation of Years 1 and 2

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Executive Summary

A.1 Program Overview

The Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): Beyond Grad grant program (referred to as “GEAR UP” in this report) serves approximately 10,000 students from six Texas independent school districts (ISDs), including 12 middle schools and high schools in rural communities in West Texas, Southeast Texas, and the Coastal Bend.¹

GEAR UP provides targeted services to a grade-specific primary cohort of students who were in Grade 7 during the 2018–19 school year (i.e., **the class of 2024**) through their first year of postsecondary education (i.e., through the 2024–25 academic year). GEAR UP also provides basic services to a **priority cohort** of students consisting of all other students in Grades 9–12 attending participating high schools in the grantee districts during each year of the seven-year grant (i.e., from school years 2018–19 to 2024–25). The core strategies conceptualized in GEAR UP to close the college achievement gap include increasing academic rigor, preparing middle school students, expanding college and career advising and resources for high school students, leveraging technology to expand advising capacity, and developing local alliances (the full description of GEAR UP strategies is listed in Appendix A).

TEA is working with participating districts to make a range of programs and services aligned with these core strategies available to class of 2024 and priority cohort students, such as comprehensive individualized college and career counseling, college visits, and opportunities to participate in an academic enrichment or college exploration summer program. Parents/guardians of class of 2024 and priority cohort students also have access to individualized college and career counseling and a variety of parent workshops/events. In addition, teachers and personnel at GEAR UP campuses have access to professional development (PD) to improve academic rigor and college and career counseling services. While in middle school, class of 2024 students also had access to a college and career exploration course to help students learn about different pathways available to them.

To implement the programs and services, TEA has partnered with several organizations. TEA has partnered with three non-profit organizations—College for Every Student (CFES) Brilliant Pathways, Advise TX, and College Advising Corps (CAC)—to implement college and career counseling/advising services at the high school level. Each organization is serving two districts and providing at least one full-time advisor to serve each GEAR UP high school. TEA has also partnered with Texas OnCourse to develop the new college and career exploration course

¹ The school districts participating in TEA’s GEAR UP grant include Culberson County-Allamore ISD, Education Service Center 19 with San Elizario ISD, Mathis ISD, Sinton ISD, Sheldon ISD, and Cleveland ISD.

through the Texas OnCourse platform. Finally, TEA has partnered with TNTP to implement various PD components of the grant.²

One of TEA's ultimate purposes in implementing the GEAR UP grant is not only to support college and career readiness initiatives at the six participating grantee districts but to also identify the most successful initiatives at those districts that can be scaled statewide.

Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

This report presents findings from the implementation study during the first two program years—school years 2018–19 (Year 1) and 2019–20 (Year 2) based on data collected via stakeholder surveys, site visits (in-person and virtual), and telephone interviews (see Appendix B for full methodological details). The report highlights how GEAR UP is being implemented, potential best and promising practices, how the program is being sustained, what activities should be sustained, and how program activities are being scaled across the state (see Appendix B for the list of evaluation questions used to guide the implementation study).³

There are some notable limitations to the findings presented in this report. Since ICF and Agile Analytics did not begin the evaluation until November 2019, fall of Year 2, the findings regarding program implementation during Year 1 are somewhat limited and rely on stakeholders' recollections of implementation during the first year of the program. In addition, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent school closures in March 2020 interrupted the planned Year 2 data collection activities which were take place in March and April 2020. Many of those activities were postponed to fall 2020 and prompted participants to recollect their experiences and perceptions during Year 2, the prior year. Retrospective perceptions of grant implementation were most likely not as accurate or comprehensive as if the evaluation team had collected stakeholder perceptions about activities while those activities were underway. In addition, the Grade 12 students and their parents/guardians from Year 2 were largely excluded from make-up data collection activities in fall 2020 since most of those Grade 12 students graduated the previous spring. Exclusion of their perspectives is another notable limitation. Ultimately, because of these factors, the findings shared in this report must be interpreted with caution.

Key Findings: Program Year 1

- ▶ **Grant Start-Up and Initial Implementation.** Districts to participate in GEAR UP were selected through a competitive grant process in Year 1. Once awarded, implementation focused primarily on planning for the integration of the grant into existing college and career

² Founded originally as the New Teacher Project (TNTP) in 1997, TNTP is an organization that helps educators improve effectiveness in classroom teaching: <https://tntp.org/>. The organization changed its name to simply TNTP after its mission expanded beyond only serving new teachers.

³ In general, findings are presented at the program level in the report narrative and broken out at the district level in the appendices. Notable findings that stem from individual districts, however, are highlighted in the main narrative. To protect the anonymity of school districts and personnel, districts are not referred to by name but according to a randomly generated number that serves as a pseudonym (e.g., District 1, District 2).

readiness programs. TNTP also conducted a needs assessment in Year 1 to help inform the PD to be delivered in Year 2; most districts reported that their needs assessment findings revealed the need to increase rigor.

Key Findings: Program Year 2

- ▶ **Academic Initiatives.** School principals credited the increase in Algebra I enrollment among Grade 8 students in Year 2 compared to previous years in the district with their district’s focus on GEAR UP goals and objectives. Districts also implemented strategies such as aligning middle school and high school academic language and curriculum and focusing on increasing Advanced Placement (AP) test scores to help increase preparedness and success in advanced courses among students. Districts highlighted efforts to provide individualized college entrance examination preparation using different online platforms; despite positive feedback on the online platforms, students and parents reported needing additional test preparation resources.
- ▶ **College and Career Advising and Career Exploration Initiatives.** Class of 2024 students met one-on-one with middle school counselors, GEAR UP coordinators, and district advisors in Year 2 to discuss topics such as the transition to high school, endorsements, career interests, and postsecondary education plans. Priority cohort students met one-on-one with non-profit advisors and high school counselors to discuss postsecondary education options, financial aid, career plans, and other related topics. Most teachers of the new Texas OnCourse College and Career Readiness (TXOC CCR) curriculum in GEAR UP schools reported that the curriculum was a good fit for their school and provided opportunities for class of 2024 students to learn more about postsecondary education and explore their career interests. Students who reported that they participated in GEAR UP activities such as college visits, work-based learning activities, and summer programming, were satisfied with their experiences. The COVID-19 school closures ultimately led to the cancellation of some college visits in Year 2. In addition, some districts noted that they were not able to complete all planned individualized advising sessions with students due to the COVID-19 school closures.
- ▶ **PD Initiatives.** All districts reported offering PD activities related to academic rigor in core content classes and individualized educator coaching and/or mentoring. Counselors were also offered training in college and career advising. Teachers and school personnel reported that they found vertical alignment activities helped them to align their curriculum across grades and support student preparedness and achievement. Through the delivery of PD, TNTP worked with districts to strengthen their professional learning communities (PLCs).
- ▶ **Sustainability Initiatives.** Some site visit participants commented that the implementation of GEAR UP in Year 2 provided important opportunities to reflect on how their district could improve college and career readiness across the district, including in elementary grades. Some of the GEAR UP initiatives that site visit participants said they plan to sustain after Year 2 included increased Algebra I enrollment, continued high school Spanish I courses for Grade 8 students, one-on-one middle school advising, and the TXOC CCR curriculum.

- ▶ **Scaling Initiatives Across Texas.** Services provided by GEAR UP, such as TXOC CCR curriculum, were piloted by TEA in the six GEAR UP districts in Year 2 as well as three additional school districts in Texas with the intention that such services may be able to be scaled statewide. Feedback from districts that participated in the TXOC CCR pilot program in Year 2 indicated that they agreed that the curriculum provided opportunities to learn about careers and endorsements; however, they less frequently agreed that the materials were grade-appropriate. They were also generally satisfied with the instructor resources, student resources, and the trainings they received.

Promising Practices

Based on an analysis of implementation in Years 1 and 2, the evaluation team identified the following set of promising practices:

- ▶ **Hire current personnel within the district to serve in the GEAR UP coordinator role.** The District 5 principal explained that because the GEAR UP coordinator previously held a role in the district before GEAR UP, personnel in the school knew the coordinator and did not have to spend time to build a relationship. The existing relationships help to expedite buy-in to the grant and the integration of the program at the high school.
- ▶ **Increase AP class rigor and student expectations to increase AP scores.** To help increase rigor in AP classes and the number of students who passed AP exams, District 3 personnel conducted a book study on *All 4s and 5s: A Guide to Teaching and Leading Advanced Placement Programs* by Andrew Sharos. A high school administrator said that this study helped their school to understand how to set higher expectations for their students enrolled in AP courses and also increase the rigor of the courses. The administrator credited this new approach as leading to an increase in AP examination scores.
- ▶ **Use online test preparation tools to provide personalized test preparation for students.** Staff at District 6 highlighted their use of an online test preparation program to support individualized college entrance examination preparation for students. The program provided individualized results to students which identified needed areas for improvement. Staff also used aggregate results to shape course instruction to close the gaps in students' test scores.
- ▶ **Integrate TXOC CCR curriculum into existing college and career readiness curricula.** GEAR UP districts were able to design their own their format for implementing the TXOC CCR curriculum. Some districts incorporated the TXOC CCR curriculum into existing Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) or other college and career readiness classes already in place, which staff reported worked well.
- ▶ **Supplement college visit experiences with additional conversations with college staff and students.** Staff from Districts 1 and 3 described events in which they coordinated guest speakers, including local college students, to speak with students in their district as a low-cost measure to increase students' exposure to college and career options.
- ▶ **Implement college and career readiness activities earlier in students' education.** The District 5 coordinator commented that the first two years of GEAR UP allowed their district to reflect on the importance of implementing college and career readiness activities for

students across all grades. As part of their GEAR UP sustainability planning, the coordinator added that the district planned to implement the AVID curriculum in the Kindergarten through Grade 5 classes to help enhance the college-going culture across the district.

- ▶ **Make statewide services and resources easily accessible for all educators.** To help increase successful scaling of resources, Texas OnCourse provided their curriculum and related resources on their public-facing website that can be accessed by anyone. This effort increased the accessibility of all of the components of their TXOC CCR curriculum work to not only those who participated in the pilot, but anyone interested in the resources.
- ▶ **Provide question and answer sessions for parents/guardians with older students and/or recent graduates during parent events.** District 6 personnel held an event in which parents and families were able to ask recent college graduates from the district questions about their experiences and recommendations for future students. Class of 2024 parents who attended the event noted that it was helpful and “an eye-opener” to hear students’ experiences.
- ▶ **Provide activities to actively engage students and parents in college and career events.** Districts 2, 5, and 6 reported that they used scavenger hunts in student and parent events to help maintain participant engagement and received positive feedback regarding these activities.
- ▶ **Pair college and career family events with existing parent events.** Districts described connecting with parents and families to provide them with information about GEAR UP and college and career options during events held for other purposes. Providing information at events where parents and families are most likely to be in attendance for other purposes, such as school performances or athletic events, may help personnel connect with parents and families they may otherwise never have reached.

Recommendations

In addition, the evaluation team identified the following recommendations for TEA to consider in future grant implementation and implementation of similar programming outside of GEAR UP:

- ▶ **Integrate TXOC CCR curriculum and resources with other existing college and career readiness initiatives and activities.** Strategically aligning TXOC CCR curriculum with other college and career readiness initiatives and activities already implemented at schools, such as AVID courses, may help schools build on their college-going culture and streamline efforts to communicate information to students about postsecondary education, careers, and the transition to high school.
- ▶ **Provide additional training to TXOC CCR teachers and administrators to help them expand on and adapt lessons to make them relevant to students across Texas.** To increase the usability of the TXOC CCR resources in a wide variety of settings, trainings on how to adapt lessons so that they may be expanded may be helpful. In addition, providing guidance on how to adapt the content so that it may resonate with students of different backgrounds with different experiences may help to enhance the implementation of the curriculum.

- ▶ **Provide grade-relevant college and career readiness services and activities as early as possible.** Districts should consider developing a college-going culture across students of all grades in a grade-appropriate manner. This approach may potentially mitigate common barriers to postsecondary education, such as limited information regarding school types and available financial aid.
- ▶ **Increase awareness of parent events.** As GEAR UP becomes more prominent and integrated in each district, personnel may consider a variety of outreach messaging to reach all parents, such as email, phone, text, social media, direct mail, and flyers around school and the local neighborhoods and community. Schools may also consider how to collaborate with other events that have higher parent engagement—which may help them to connect with parents and families more frequently and those who are less aware of programs such as GEAR UP.
- ▶ **Incorporate parents’ schedules and availability into planning of parent events.** Some parents noted in site visits that they were either not aware of or available for scheduled events. To help address this challenge, parents recommended for schools to offer multiple sessions of parent events and to provide more flexible meeting times to better suit the schedules of parents.
- ▶ **Increase awareness among high school students of Federal Pell Grants.** Out of the financial aid topics students were asked about on the student survey, all grade levels were least aware of Federal Pell Grants. Because the grants do not have to be repaid and are targeted for low-income students, these students may benefit from increased knowledge of the Pell Grant and other financial aid available to them.
- ▶ **Provide more substantive college visits that align to student and parent interests and questions.** Students suggested college visits include more time visiting colleges and visiting different parts of campuses—including visits to classes. Parents suggested schools strategically align college visits to student interests as well as career and education plans.
- ▶ **Explore the implementation of college fairs more in the evaluation of GEAR UP.** College and career fairs were widely implemented in Year 2 to increase student and parent exposure to different opportunities within and outside their local community as well as their knowledge of how to pursue these opportunities. As the implementation of GEAR UP activities and services continues to be evaluated, considerations should be made for continued monitoring of these events as well as an understanding of the role of GEAR UP in hosting or planning of these events.