



Charter School Program Grant Implementation Report, 2021–22 and 2022– 23

Prepared by McREL International and Gibson Consulting Group, Inc. for the
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Executive Summary

In 2020, Texas secured a five-year, \$100 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the Expanding Opportunity Through Quality Charter Schools Program (CSP) Grants to State Entities. With this grant, Texas offered competitive grants of up to \$900,000 to provide financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools and support the growth of high-quality charter schools in Texas, especially those focused on improving academic outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students. These grants assist eligible applicants in opening and preparing for the operation of newly authorized charter schools and replicated high-quality schools. For ease of reading, these will be referred to as “grants” and “grantees” in the rest of the report.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) contracted with McREL International and Gibson Consulting Group to conduct an evaluation of CSP grant cohorts over four years of the contract. The evaluation work began in spring 2022 and is expected to continue through 2025. The evaluation includes a range of data collection efforts, including annual surveys of CSP grantee principals, as well as site visits (comprising principal interviews, teacher focus groups, and classroom observations) to CSP grantees. Reports and briefings will describe school characteristics, changes in key implementation and performance metrics over time in CSP schools, and an exploration of relationships between CSP grant usage, CSP school characteristics, and student outcomes.

The focus of this report is to describe CSP Cohort 1 grantees implementation progress over the first two years of the grant, 2021–22 and 2022–23. The results of this evaluation will inform TEA’s understanding of which activities school staff prioritized, how grant funds were used to support these startup processes, and the areas in which CSP schools grew the most and areas in which further growth is needed. These findings are expected to inform future efforts to support new charter schools and the administration of related grants.

Findings Highlights

Planning and intended uses of the CSP grant

Prior to applying for a CSP grant, applicants were required to conduct a needs assessment and to describe the ways in which the grant funds would be used to address those needs. Applications communicated the intent to purchase high-quality curricula and instructional materials, classroom equipment, furniture and instructional supplies, technology, software, and assessment systems, and to provide staff with professional development needed to support effective instruction. Other priority expenses included marketing and recruiting efforts to introduce the school to the community and to attract new students.

Staff recruitment and support

Recruiting, hiring, and supporting high-quality teachers and other staff were among the most crucial tasks of the initial implementation period. Across 2021–22 and 2022–23, principals implemented a wide variety of strategies to attract strong candidates to their schools; among the most used methods were attending job fairs, current teachers recruiting colleagues, word of mouth, and social media. Despite these varied efforts and the fact that most principals had implemented effective processes for selecting and hiring highly qualified staff, the challenges of recruiting and retaining high-quality educators was persistent as the number needed exceeded the number recruited.

Once teachers and other staff were hired and onboarded, the work of supporting staff began. Strong school leaders are at the heart of supporting staff and results from this study showed that the actions of consistent, cohesive administrative teams increased the likelihood that teachers were satisfied and felt supported. The types of support most valued by teachers included assistance with student behavior management, as well as timely feedback and coaching to help them develop and maintain a strong instructional practice. Some of the instructional support practices most often noted by principals were attending professional learning community meetings and providing dedicated planning time for teachers to collaborate.

Establishing a positive school climate and culture

Establishing a positive school climate and culture for students and staff were high-priority tasks during the initial implementation period. Over the first two years of the grant, many CSP principals reported that they effectively established a culture of shared success, a school vision focused on high expectations for students and staff, and a safe and healthy work environment for teachers. Principals also made progress in their community outreach and student recruitment efforts, establishing an effective learning environment, and to a lesser degree, implemented school-wide systems to support student behavior.

Findings highlights continues on the next page

Findings Highlights Continued

Community outreach and student recruitment

Whether a new or a replication school, CSP grantees had to undertake some degree of marketing and awareness building in community to engage families who might see their school as a good fit for their students.

In 2021–22 and 2022–23, many CSP principals established connections by encouraging parents to come into the school for school events, open houses, and volunteer opportunities. Principals refined their communication strategies during the initial implementation period through their focus on communicating about student-school fit as well as the mission and educational philosophy of the school. Across the first two years of operation, Cohort 1 schools were more likely to rely on electronic means for recruiting students (e.g., websites, email, and text messaging) than door-to-door campaigns and formal presentations at community events.

Cohort 1 schools worked to develop a strong learning environment on many fronts. This included improvements to the processes of hiring effective teachers and instructional leaders and increased use of high-quality instructional materials that were aligned to instructional calendars and formative assessments. Between 2021–22 and 2022–23, principals reported substantial growth in the degree to which their schools implemented effective classroom routines and instructional practices.

The implementation of multi-tiered systems of support components also grew over the first two years of the grant. Many Cohort 1 schools prioritized the implementation of tiered support for students, particularly the Tier 1 practices that support all learners, including the use of universal screeners and evidence based practices in general education classrooms. There was also strong growth in schools’ use of progress monitoring systems and data-based decision-making to identify and support students’ academic needs. The use of strategies such as targeted pull-out instruction by interventionists and in-school instructional or tutorial labs showed a strong commitment to meeting student needs during the school day.

Campus-wide practices to support student behavior

Across CSP campuses, there was progress toward establishing clear expectations and systems to support student behavior. Eighty percent (80%) of Cohort 1 principals indicated that they had implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports *to a great extent* by 2022–23. Fewer campuses reported this level of progress in other areas of student relationship building and behavior management. For example, in 2022–23 around half of principals (53%) reported that they had developed a culture of respect among students and fewer (40%) reported that they had developed and implemented behavior management systems for students and staff *to a great extent*.

Next Steps in the Implementation Study

As the study team reflects on what was learned from Cohort 1 and considers what can be applied to subsequent cohorts, the following topics emerged as important next steps in the implementation study.

Continue to examine teacher recruitment and retention efforts

First and foremost, the study team recommends a continued focus on CSP schools' successes and challenges with staffing. The state of Texas and the entire nation are amid a teacher shortage and higher than typical teacher turnover rates, and CSP grantee schools are not immune to these trends. A deeper focus on schools' effective strategies for recruiting, hiring, and retaining high-quality staff can inform future efforts to expand charter schools in ways that ensure high-quality instruction for the students who attend these schools. Of particular interest could be gathering success stories for ways in which grant funds successfully aided recruitment and retention efforts.

Continue to monitor instructional best practices

Of the many topics explored in this report, CSP grantees showed the most progress in their implementation of strong instructional practices such as the adoption of high-quality instructional materials and the alignment of those materials to instructional calendars and formative assessment systems. Along with hiring and retaining high-quality teachers, the implementation of strong instructional practices is foundational to student learning. The study team recommends a continued focus on the evolution of these practices and the leadership actions to support these, and uses of grant funding that support their consistent implementation.

Continue to monitor the development of a positive school culture

The first two years of implementation data suggest that, on average, Cohort 1 grantees made more progress directly supporting instruction than they did implementing and maintaining systems to support positive student behavior. Understanding that establishing and maintaining systems to support positive student behavior is critical for student and staff satisfaction and retention, the study team recommends a continued focus on the development of these systems and other aspects of a positive school climate and the identification of success stories where the use of CSP grant funds helped to achieve these important aspects of school implementation.