



# Texas Charter School Start-Up Grant (2011–2015) Evaluation First Comprehensive Report

Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

In 2010, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) applied for and was awarded a five-year federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant to support the planning, design, and initial implementation of new public charter schools authorized from the 2010–11 through the 2014–15 school years. Through this funding, TEA awarded Public Charter School Start-Up subgrants through a competitive process among four types of eligible charter schools that began in the 2011–12 school year. During the 2011–2012 competition (Cohort I grantees), TEA made subawards totaling \$5.5 million to 11 grantees, and \$9.9 million during the 2012–2014 competition (Cohort II grantees) to 17 grantees. Grantees could use funds to meet the substantial costs of starting up a charter school, through the planning phase (up to 18 months) and initial implementation phases (up to two years), in categories that included payroll, professional and contracted services, supplies and materials, other operating costs, capital outlay, and indirect costs.

## Evaluation of the Public Charter School Start-Up Grant

TEA contracted with ICF to conduct an evaluation of its Public Charter School Start-Up Grant program. This contract began in July 2011 and will end on August 31, 2017. Through this evaluation, ICF is (1) examining how grantees budget for and use their grant funds; (2) gathering data to understand charter school planning and initial implementation; and (3) examining charter school performance, with a particular focus on the characteristics of high-performing charter school campuses and best practices in how grantees use grant funds.

This report is the first comprehensive report to be produced for the evaluation of the Public Charter School Start-Up Grant program, and it incorporates and builds on findings from the first interim brief, incorporated into this report, and includes analyses and data from both Cohort I and Cohort II grantees. In addition to analyses of grant applications, budgets, and expenditures, this report includes findings from data collected through surveys administered to charter school campus teachers, administrators, and charter holder board members and from site visits to selected Cohort I and II schools. This report continues to address Research Question 1 (In what specific ways do grantees utilize Charter School Start-Up funds?) and begins to address Research Question 2 (What best practices can be identified in how grantees use funds?).

## Key Findings

### ***Research Question 1: In what specific ways do grantees use Public Charter School Start-Up Grant funds?***

Public Charter School Start-Up Grantee spending through September 30, 2014 and, therefore, needs, had not changed drastically across Cohorts I and II (between 2011 and 2014), and charter type did not connote a particular spending pattern for planning and implementation of programs. No cohort-wide patterns were found in grantee spending, although some evidence of differences in spending by charter type was apparent. When the breakdown of grantee spending between the planning and the implementation phases was examined, results were more varied. Although Cohort I grantees spent a greater proportion of their funds during planning, while Cohort II grantees spent more during implementation, the large degree of

variation within each cohort presents no clear pattern. In addition, no patterns emerged based on charter type for spending during either phase.

No cohort-based patterns were found in grantee spending by expenditure category, but Public Charter School Start-Up Grant spending by expenditure category was related to charter type. Spending by Cohort I grantees exhibited a pattern of being distributed more widely across expenditure categories, both for general funds from other sources and for Public Charter School Start-Up Grant funds, compared to that of Cohort II. Furthermore, there was a detectable pattern in spending differences across expenditure categories that existed based on charter school type. Patterns in spending on individual products and services may be more attributable to charter type, rather than cohort, adding evidence to the conclusion that grantees with different charter types spent grant funds differently. Upon closer inspection of grantee spending by charter type on individual products and services, grantees operating open-enrollment charter schools spent funds across a broader array of products and services than new schools designated under an existing charter and campus charter school grantees. Analysis of data from future cohorts will determine if this pattern continues to exist.

***Research Question 2: What best practices can be identified in how grantees use funds?***

Six best practices were culled from the analysis of data from the nine high-performing grantees across Cohorts I and II, and the four grantees that participated in site visits. Although these best practices are based on preliminary findings from two cohorts, some implications can be drawn.

**Potential Best Practice 1:** Spending Public Charter School Start-Up Grant funds to establish and support school culture and climate helped foster engagement and ownership. Having a clear vision from the outset of the school culture and climate that will be promoted and then devoting a proportion of funds to making this vision apparent for students, teachers, and others in the school community helped foster engagement and ownership.

**Potential Best Practice 2:** Building a diverse support network specifically to assist with a variety of processes helped with effective start-up implementation. Recognizing aspects of program development and implementation where support might be needed to build a more effective program is crucial. This strategy can make tasks seem less insurmountable, especially if guidance from experts or from those experienced in a particular area allows grantees to focus energy on other key areas that need attention.

**Potential Best Practice 3:** Demonstrating flexibility in planning and use of funds throughout the grant period helped grantees with implementation. An important consideration for this practice was maintaining the overall vision for the charter, while being open to changes. Successful grantees will need to exhibit some degree of flexibility in implementation and in how funds are used to strike a delicate balance between reinforcing a school vision established at the onset and being open to important adjustments that may emerge over time. Of equal importance is the implementation modification process; specifically, who is involved in decision making, and what data are used to prompt changes in implementation. Two aspects of the best practice of flexibility in use of funds were prevalent across grantees. First, budget revisions were carefully considered through deliberate processes such as needs assessments. Second, changes proposed through amendments did not alter, but instead enhanced, the overall vision.

**Potential Best Practice 4:** High-performing start-up grantees used evidence to inform practice, particularly in making decisions about policies, activities, and purchases. Relying on evidence from assessments and other data sources can help inform grantees of what is working and where improvements are needed, thus helping to target instructional and management approaches. This best practice speaks again to a process of continuous improvement and refinement, based on feedback from stakeholders and student needs.

**Potential Best Practice 5:** Integrating technology with curriculum and instructional approaches helped grantees address gaps and reinforce their school models. This best practice goes further than simply having technology available. By closely and thoughtfully integrating technology with the overall instructional approach, gaps across subject areas can be addressed and the school model can be reinforced for teachers and students. Implementation of this best practice can have important benefits for low-income students, who may have less access to technology outside of the school environment. In addition, overall student engagement can be improved by appropriate technology integration.

**Potential Best Practice 6:** Creating a collaborative relationship among stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and parents helped improve the school culture. Involving teachers and other stakeholders in decision making encourages a collective school culture and buy-in from staff.

Throughout the best practices described, a recurring theme of fostering a collaborative environment is apparent. Being open to feedback from experts, teachers, and parents is important for improvement of processes and better outcomes. By involving stakeholders, a community of individuals invested in the charter school's success is established, and students benefit from an environment shaped to their learning needs.

## Next Steps

To further address Research Question 1, the final report will include descriptive analyses similar to those provided in Chapter 1 of this report. The inclusion of data from additional grantees will allow ICF to investigate if patterns identified in this report continue to hold as more grantees are added to the analysis sample and to assess how grant funds are being spent differently by Cohorts III and IV and what the reasons might be for these differences.

To continue to address Research Question 2, the final report will include site visit data from five additional grantees from Cohort III. These additional data will allow ICF to better understand the extent to which best practices identified in this report are being implemented by grantees and whether any practices are being implemented in new and innovative ways. The additional site visit data will also allow ICF to confirm whether practices identified in this report are truly effective and to identify any additional best practices that may emerge.

In the final report, Research Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6 will also be addressed, focusing on outcomes of students in grantee schools and comparing some outcome measures to students in neighborhood schools.