

# Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

## Annual Implementation Report

### Evaluation of Year 5

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## Executive Summary

Now in its fifth year of program implementation, the Texas Gaining Early Access to Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): Beyond Grad program (referred to as “GEAR UP” in this report) made important progress during the 2022–23 school year to support college and career readiness for students from low-income schools in Texas. Even so, in Year 5, challenges with teacher and counselor staffing were a prominent barrier in programming and services.

## Program Overview

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** consisting of all other students in Grades 9–12 attending participating high schools in the grantee districts during each year of the 7-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).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is working with six Texas independent school districts (ISDs) in West Texas, Southeast Texas, and the Coastal Bend to implement a range of services aligned with these core strategies to class of 2024 and priority cohort students. These services include comprehensive individualized college and career counseling, college visits, and opportunities to participate in an academic enrichment or college exploration summer program, among other services. 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.

To implement the programs and services, TEA has partnered with several organizations. In Year 5, TEA partnered with two non-profit organizations—CFES Brilliant Pathways and Advise TX—to implement college and career counseling/advising services at the high school level.<sup>1,2</sup> Advise TX served four of the six participating districts and CFES Brilliant Pathways served the remaining two districts and provided at least one full-time advisor to serve each GEAR UP high

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<sup>1</sup> Founded initially as College For Every Student, the organization changed its name in 2018 to [CFES Brilliant Pathways](#) to better reflect its expanded mission to support students in both college and career.

<sup>2</sup> In Years 1–4, TEA additionally partnered with a third organization, College Advising Corps (CAC), to provide college and career counseling/advising services.

school. TEA also partnered with TNTP, a non-profit organization, to implement various PD components of the grant.<sup>3</sup>

## Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

This report presents findings from the implementation study during the fifth year—school year 2022–23 (Year 5)—when the class of 2024 students were in Grade 11 and the priority cohort students were in Grade 9, Grade 10, and Grade 12. Findings were derived from data collected via stakeholder surveys, virtual site visits, and telephone interviews (see Appendix B for full methodological details). The report highlights how GEAR UP is being implemented, promising practices, how the program is being sustained and 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).

### Key Findings

Due to the low numbers of parent respondents and particular groups of respondents (e.g., counselors participating in Texas OnCourse, students indicating their plans to complete Algebra II in the upcoming year) interpretation of these results should be considered cautiously. Additionally, in Year 5, more students participated in the student survey than in Year 4. As these groups of students may be different, longitudinal results should be interpreted with caution as well.

- **Academic preparedness among students.** Personnel survey respondents generally perceived students were *Somewhat Prepared* to take advanced courses. Site visit participants said that students who completed Algebra I in Grade 8 were more prepared for high school-level mathematics courses upon entry into high school compared to those students who did not complete Algebra I in Grade 8. Key challenges with academic initiatives across the participating districts focused on barriers related to staffing and teacher shortages.
- **Tutoring opportunities offered to students.** Across all subjects, student survey respondents reported mainly participating in after-school tutoring, with tutoring for mathematics courses being the most prominent subject reported by students. While the majority of students who reported participating in tutoring found it to be helpful, site visit participants said that due to some students' family responsibilities, participating in after-school tutoring was a challenge as students sought to balance their academic and family needs.
- **Test preparation support.** The majority of students who reported participating in SAT, ACT, or the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) test preparation activities reported the test preparation helped them prepare for college entrance exams. Class of 2024 parent respondents were more familiar with college entrance exams and where to

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<sup>3</sup> Founded originally as The New Teacher Project (TNTP) in 1997, [TNTP](#) is an organization that helps educators improve effectiveness in classroom teaching. The organization changed its name to simply TNTP after its mission expanded beyond serving new teachers.

find test preparation resources compared to priority cohort Grade 10 and Grade 12 parents.

- **Advising services.** As students progressed through high school, topics discussed in one-on-one advising transitioned from student's grades and course selection to include more postsecondary-education-related topics such as college applications and college plans or interests. Students reported being *Satisfied* with their advising sessions. As in past years, among students and parents who did not participate in one-on-one advising, the most common reason for not participating was a lack of awareness that the meetings were offered.
- **College and career readiness activities.** College visits, college and career fairs, summer programming, and work-based learning activities continued to be offered in Year 5. Overall, student and parent survey respondents and site visit participants were generally *Satisfied* with each of the activities in which they participated. Participants noted that challenges with staffing the non-profit advisor position within the district, transportation for off-site activities, and a lack of availability of college tours at trade schools affected the districts' abilities to implement programming in Year 5. Across the college and career exploration initiatives, students and parents reported the most common reason they did not participate was that they were unaware the activity was being offered.
- **Parent activities.** Parent events mainly focused on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, different types of college options, and the availability of college and career advising, as reported by site visit participants and/or survey respondents. As with other college and career exploration initiatives, parent survey respondents cited a lack of awareness about family events being offered as the primary reason for not participating.
- **PD and vertical teaming initiatives.** TNTP provided individualized support to districts, with a specific focus on academic rigor. In Year 5, TNTP's PD strategy shifted to a systems-based approach. Overall, personnel survey respondents had positive perceptions of the PD and coaching/mentoring they received. Respondents *Agreed* the PD provided strategies that increased rigor and were easy to implement. Respondents also *Agreed* the coaching/mentoring helped them to increase the rigor in their courses. Alternatively, while participants generally *Agreed* that the vertical teaming they participated in helped to align curriculum and reduce the need for remediation at the postsecondary level, 13% of respondents disagreed with this notion.
- **Sustainability initiatives.** Participating districts reported efforts to sustain GEAR UP initiatives for the follow-on cohort in middle schools, specifically focusing on continuing to offer Algebra I in Grade 8 and providing individual advising. Although site visit participants reported offering these initiatives, some initiatives were adapted to support sustainability, such as broadening the scope of individual advising or using a different college and career course curriculum.
- **Statewide financial aid initiatives.** The Texas law that went into effect in the 2020–21 school year required Grade 12 students to complete a FAFSA, a Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA), or an opt-out form in order to graduate from high school. The most widely used resources to support completion of this requirement, as reported

by district respondents to a statewide survey administered by ICF, were the Federal Student Aid website and the ApplyTexas Counselor Suite. Respondents were generally satisfied with the financial aid resources they used in the 2022–23 school year.

Participants noted the need for additional resources for families in other languages, particularly Spanish, and resources for parents and families to address concerns regarding sharing their income tax information.

- **Grant implementation support.** TEA and TNTP supported implementation of GEAR UP through the continued facilitation of monthly progress monitoring meetings with GEAR UP coordinators and improved data tracking with the implementation of a new data management system, CoPilot. Coordinators emphasized the helpfulness and flexibility of CoPilot staff during the implementation of the new system.

## Promising Practices

The evaluation team identified several promising practices implemented by districts in Year 5 in alignment with GEAR UP core strategies:

- **Provide preparatory tests during school days to increase participation.** A District 6 coordinator shared that this year SAT preparatory tests were offered during in-school days to increase access to preparation activities. The coordinator noted that SAT preparatory tests were offered on Saturdays in previous years, which contributed to low student participation.
- **Leverage vertical teaming to improve academic rigor.** District 2 staff said that they leveraged vertical teams to improve academic rigor in their coursework, specifically in mathematics. As a result of vertical teaming, participating mathematics teachers reported they saw increased alignment across middle and high schools and improved rigor in middle school mathematics coursework.
- **Use interactive learning techniques to engage students.** The non-profit advisor serving District 2 described “one of the [students’] favorite” activities was college and career bingo, where the advisor would call out definitions and students had to find the associated word on their board, and then the class would engage in a discussion on the term. The advisor used college and career paraphernalia as prizes for students. The advisor said the students “really enjoyed [the activity], and I think it helped them to grasp the content of what I was talking about. I did that on all grade levels, but had different discussion at the grade levels.” Class of 2024 student participants also described the activity as “fun.”
- **Meet parents “where they are” in advising to establish trust.** The non-profit advisor from District 2 described the importance of meeting families where they are to establish trust. The advisor mentioned sharing their own background as a first-generation college student with parents: “I was first generation. I told [families] that my parents weren't able to help me. It's fortunate that I'm available to help them. I tell them they can ask me any questions, email me, text me at any time. I'm open to them, their needs, and concerns.”
- **Break up FAFSA nights into multiple events to scaffold completion.** To make completing the FAFSA less challenging for families, Districts 1 and 2 offered a series of events to help families complete the FAFSA, each focused on a different aspect of

completion such as creating their account or completing student sections first before transitioning to parent-based events.

- **Use “data walks” to provide feedback to teachers and inform their coaching and mentoring sessions.** A District 2 site visit participant reported the district employed “data walks” to provide teachers with constructive feedback following classroom observations. Administrators observed classrooms using phones and Google tablets to record perceptions and feedback. After observations, teachers participated in a post-conference and received a PDF copy of the report showcasing areas of needed improvement that informed their coaching and mentoring sessions.
- **Invite alumni to vertical alignment discussions to identify areas of growth for increased college readiness.** Alumni from Districts 2 and 3 were invited to participate in vertical alignment teams to share their feedback on how prepared they were for college and career as well as to highlight areas of improvement for the districts. Participating alumni shared the need for increased consistency of expectations from middle to high school along with additional focus on rigor, time management, notetaking, and other writing skills.
- **Continue to offer Algebra I in Grade 8.** Site visit and/or phone interview participants from Districts 1, 3, and 4 noted the benefits of continuing to offer Algebra I in Grade 8, such as providing students with more flexibility in their schedules in high school for other courses of interest and preparing them for high school-level mathematics courses upon entry into high school.
- **Offer financial aid information at every school event to support increased access to information and resources for parents.** The District 3 coordinator said that they always had financial aid information at every event, regardless of targeted grade or event type, such as dual credit nights or student art fairs. Every opportunity to engage with families was viewed as an opportunity to share college- and career-related resources because many families had students in multiple grades. The coordinator used the initial event to spark conversations with parents and then provided additional financial aid information if applicable.

## Recommendations

The evaluation team identified several recommendations for TEA to consider in future GEAR UP grant implementation and the implementation of similar programming:

- **Provide support for establishing alignment with advanced courses and state standards, especially for those offered in a virtual setting.** Additional resources and support to ensure alignment between new advanced course programs or curricula for participating districts may increase rigor in advanced courses. For example, one district utilized an online program to overcome barriers with staffing advanced courses; however, they expressed additional needs for standardization across the teachers and with state standards.
- **Expand opportunities for students to learn about and understand the requirements and expectations of participating in dual credit courses.** While some districts acknowledged the benefits of dual credit opportunities, there were still concerns

that students may not be prepared for—or understand—the benefits of such courses. Emphasizing the expectations of students in dual credit courses along with the benefits of enrollment may support increased success among participating students.

- **Leverage existing opportunities for in-class tutoring.** As site visit participants emphasized that students' competing priorities (e.g., childcare, part-time job) conflicted with after-school tutoring opportunities, leveraging existing opportunities during the school day and expanding them to include tutoring services may increase access to those students for whom after-school offerings are not feasible. For example, site visit participants from one district described having allocated time within school hours for test preparation.
- **Prepare new teachers for a successful year through a New Teacher Academy.** As teacher shortages and staffing concerns were prominent challenges across districts in Year 5, continuing to offer supports focused on classroom management skills and how to establish and maintain rigorous instruction, such as through TNTP's New Teacher Academy, would help ensure new and/or interim teachers were supported, especially non-certified Interim Assignment Teachers.
- **Increase awareness among district teachers and administrators of the definition of academic rigor.** TNTP should consider collaborating with the districts to establish a plan for how district administrators will support a shared understanding of academic rigor across teachers and staff. While TNTP provided participating districts with an overview and definition of academic rigor, site visit participants did not appear to be aware of the shared definition. TNTP recognized that this conceptualization of academic rigor may not have trickled down to teachers or staff within the districts.
- **Increase communication and collaboration between non-profit advisors and district teachers and staff.** Personnel survey respondents emphasized the need for improved communication with non-profit advisors, specifically regarding identifying an appropriate time for advising and college and career activities based on course and testing schedules.
- **Expand training and resources available to counselors and administrators on components related to allocating their work time.** Participating counselors discussed the need for more information regarding the Texas Education Code (TEC) § 33.006 relating to the use of public school counselor's work time.<sup>4</sup> Counselors believed there were still duties they were responsible for that, from their assessment of the statute, they believed should have no longer been under their purview. Across districts, counselors were concerned with a lack of clear understanding of specific activities counselors should (or should not) be responsible for under the statute.
- **Expand opportunities for college and career activities available to students.** Broadly, student participants stated they want additional opportunities to learn about postsecondary options. Students expressed the desire for increased hands-on and

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<sup>4</sup> Since [Texas Senate Bill 179 from the 87<sup>th</sup> Legislature](#) has been codified into law in September of 2021, Texas school counselors must now spend at least 80% of their total work time on duties that are components of a counseling program developed under TEC § 33.006, including guidance curriculum, responsive services, individual planning, and system support.

interactive opportunities, such as the inclusion of classroom observations in college visits.

- **Continue to provide TNTP liaisons to districts to establish strong partnerships and buy-in between participating districts and PD providers.** With the use of district liaisons in Year 5, district staff participating in site visits reported their appreciation for the support they received from TNTP and praised the promptness of that support. Site visit participants noted that, in the past, building a strong relationship with TNTP staff was a challenge, but having a dedicated liaison in Year 5 helped improve the support and services received from TNTP.