Texas Charter School Program High-Quality Replication Grant

Executive Summary

November 2020

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Background

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) received a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education through its Charter School Program (CSP) State Entities competition in 2017. TEA used this CSP funding to administer a subgrant program designed to facilitate the replication of high-quality charter schools. The purpose of Texas's Charter School Program High-Quality Replication (CSPHQR) grant is threefold: (1) to provide financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of newly replicated, high-quality charter schools; (2) to evaluate the effects of such schools, including the effects on students, student achievement, staff, and parents; and (3) to expand the number of high-quality charter schools available to students.

To be eligible for a CSPHQR grant, an open-enrollment charter school must apply for the grant on behalf of a proposed campus that has been designated as a "high-quality charter school campus" by the commissioner of education, according to the requirements set forth in Title 19, Chapter 100, Subchapter AA of the Texas Administrative Code (TAC).[1] The first two cohorts of CSPHQR grantees consisted of 22 replication campuses. Cohort I consisted of 10 open-enrollment charter school campuses that opened in 2018–19. Cohort II consisted of six open-enrollment charter school campuses and six district-authorized charter school campuses that opened in 2019–20.[2] These district-authorized charter school campuses replicated the high-quality models of designated "charter operator partners."

Program Evaluation

In 2019, TEA contracted with the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the CSPHQR grant program. The three overriding purposes of this evaluation were (1) to examine the effectiveness and impact of the CSPHQR grant; (2) to identify the mechanisms and potential promising practices exhibited by grantees in replicating high-quality charter campuses; and (3) to examine characteristics and factors of high-quality charter schools and campuses when opening high-quality charter replication campuses. The impact analysis was limited to the 10 Cohort I campuses for which 2019 year-end assessment data were available.

The evaluation was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted using five principal sources of data: (1) TEA extant data; (2) surveys; (3) interviews and focus groups; (4) site observations; and (5) CSPHQR grant applications and grantee websites. Analytical methods included:

- Descriptive, descriptive-comparative, and correlational analyses of student-, teacher-, and school-level data;

- Descriptive analyses and Mann-Whitney U tests of survey data and site observations;

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[1] See 19 TAC §100.1033(b)(13), 2020, amended to be effective June 18, 2020.

[2] This report uses the terms "open-enrollment" and "district-authorized" when referring to charter schools. The term open-enrollment charter school is used to refer to state-authorized charter schools that operate as independent local educational agencies (LEAs) with charter holder governing boards. (See Texas Education Code (TEC), Chapter 12, Subchapter D, 2019.) These charter schools may enroll students from any school district in their approved geographic boundaries. The term district-authorized charter school is used to refer to charter school campuses authorized by the governing body of an independent school district (ISD). (See TEC Chapter 12, Subchapter C, 2019.)

- Content and thematic analyses of responses to open-ended survey prompts and to interview and focus group questions; and

- A quasi-experimental analysis of student academic outcomes using a propensity score matching (PSM) methodology.

As a general rule, the non-CSPHQR-grantee campuses associated with the high-quality, open-enrollment charter schools that received CSPHQR funding were utilized as the comparison sets for grant-funded replication campuses. This methodological approach is designed to provide TEA with preliminary information regarding whether the newly opened campuses are maintaining the quality level of those that preceded them and whether grant-funded charter schools are sustaining quality across their campuses as they scale.

Key Findings

Characteristics of CSPHQR Grantees

In their first year of operation, open-enrollment replication campuses educated a larger percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged than did the non-replication comparison campuses affiliated with their respective charter schools. The percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged at Cohort I open-enrollment replication campuses decreased by five percentage points from 2018–19 to 2019–20. Teacher demographics at Cohort I replication campuses shifted somewhat from 2018–19 to 2019–20, with the percentage of new teachers decreasing and the percentage of teachers who possessed a teaching certificate issued pursuant to TEA certification standards increasing.

Student and teacher demographics at open-enrollment and district-authorized replication campuses differed. District-authorized replication campuses educated smaller percentages of Hispanic students and English Learners (EL) in their first year than did open-enrollment replication campuses, but larger percentages of African American students, students eligible for special education services, and students classified as economically disadvantaged. Sixty-five percent of teachers at first-year, open-enrollment replication campuses and 40% of teachers at first-year, district-authorized replication campuses were new to the profession. Teachers at open-enrollment replication campuses were more likely than teachers at district-authorized campuses to be Hispanic, while teachers at district-authorized replication campuses were substantially more likely to possess a teaching certificate issued pursuant to TEA certification standards and to be African American.[3]

Planning for Replication

An analysis of the processes and practices adopted by CSPHQR grantees when planning to open replication campuses revealed meaningful philosophical and operational differences within the first two cohorts. Interviews and focus groups surfaced a broad range of perspectives regarding the degree to which grantee campuses were expected to implement the high-quality replication model with fidelity. Whereas some central office administrators expressed comfort in empowering high-quality campus

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[3] Unless a waiver is granted, teachers in open-enrollment charter schools must hold a bachelor's degree but are not required by the state to hold a teaching certificate unless they are a special education or bilingual education/English as a second language teacher, or unless specifically stated in their charter applications. Additional information about TEA's certification standards is accessible at https://tea.texas.gov/texas-educators/certification, and additional information about the process for obtaining waivers is accessible at https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/news-and-multimedia/correspondence/taa-letters/2019-2020-bilingual-education-exception/esl-waiver-application.

administrators to make responsive adaptations to their models, others were more insistent on adhering to standardized practices in new campus environments.[4] Over 80% of all survey respondents indicated that they believed grantee campuses to be moderately or extremely similar to existing campuses based on the high-quality replication models. Seventy-five percent of central office administrators and 73% of campus administrators believed that their replication campuses possessed instructional or operational autonomy.

The identification of effective campus leadership was roundly cited by central office administrators as a critical factor contributing to the early success of replication campuses, with a number of schools cultivating leaders through internal candidate pipelines. Fifty percent of the campus administrators who responded to the fall 2019 and spring 2020 Campus Educator Surveys indicated that they had been with their respective organizations for three or more years, a signal that many were familiar with the replication model when their campuses launched. Several campus administrators shared that they felt less than fully prepared prior to the opening of their campuses. Fifty-seven percent of campus administrators agreed or strongly agreed that they received professional development (PD) prior to their campuses opening, and 53% agreed or strongly agreed that they received effective support from their central offices.

Founding teacher teams at replication campuses were assembled through a combination of new staff recruitment and strategic relocation of veteran faculty. Nearly 30% of teachers who responded to the fall 2019 and spring 2020 Campus Educator Surveys indicated that they had been with their respective organizations for three or more years, suggesting that a number of teachers at early-stage replication campuses had shifted over from existing campuses based on the high-quality replication models. Ninety percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the expectations for their roles when they accepted their positions, and 86% agreed or strongly agreed that they received PD after being hired. Teachers' perceptions of the support they received from campus administrators lagged their overall feelings of preparedness, with 77% agreeing that they received effective support from campus administrators during the planning period.[5]

Replication campuses conducted community outreach efforts through a number of channels during their planning periods. Parents most frequently cited academic rigor, approach to school culture, school leadership, school model, and approach to school discipline as "very important" or "extremely important" factors in their decision to enroll their children at replication campuses. Less than two-thirds of central office personnel agreed or strongly agreed that parental demand for seats at their replication campuses was robust.

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[4] Throughout this report, the terms "central office personnel" and "central office administrator" refer interchangeably to individuals affiliated with charter school and CMO central offices that provide shared services to open-enrollment replication campuses, individuals affiliated with the ISDs that govern district-authorized replication campuses, and individuals affiliated with charter operator partners that provide services to district-authorized replication campuses.

[5] Texas defines the "planning period" as the period after the charter school campus is approved by the commissioner to open but before it begins to serve students. For district-authorized charters, the planning period is the period after the board of trustees authorizes the charter school but before the charter school begins to serve students. The "implementation period" for both begins when the charter school campus begins to serve students.

Supporting Replication Campuses

The local education agencies (LEAs) examined in this evaluation report have taken divergent approaches regarding the extent to which they allow replication campuses to exercise autonomy over their instructional programs.[6] Whereas some campuses indicated that they have autonomy to make instructional decisions they believe to be in the best interests of their students, others were expected to adhere more strictly to the curricular and assessment systems used at other campuses with which they share a high-quality model. Eighty percent of central office personnel, 79% of teachers, and 73% of campus administrators agreed or strongly agreed that replication campuses received the instructional support they needed to educate students effectively.

In addition to instructional support, LEAs also attempted to facilitate implementation of their high-quality models on replication campuses by furnishing key operational, financial, and technological supports. Central office administrators were more likely than campus administrators to agree that replication campuses received adequate financial and technological supports. This perceptual disconnect dramatizes the challenges that central offices face when attempting to support growing networks of campuses. Additionally, observational data revealed grantees to have encountered challenges when attempting to replicate key facilities-related features of their models.

Effective implementation of a replication model hinges on campus-based personnel communicating effectively with the central office teams at their respective LEAs. Eighty-three percent of both campus administrators and campus non-instructional personnel agreed or strongly agreed that two-way communication existed between their replication campuses and key constituencies within their communities. Seventy-five percent of central office administrators agreed or strongly agreed that two-way communication existed between central office and campus-based colleagues. Moreover, strong campus-home communication norms were cited as key in facilitating the transition to distance learning over the final months of the 2019–20 school year. The majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they had two-way communication with teachers and administrators at replication campuses.

Teachers received PD from internal experts (based either at their campus, a sister campus, or the central office), from trainers at their regional education service centers, or through opportunities furnished by outside providers that they identified independently and received approval to pursue. Some PD sessions, such as those covering specific instructional strategies, appeared to be mandated by central offices. In other instances, campuses were able to curate PD opportunities based on the perceived needs of their teachers, leaders, and students. Whereas 83% of central office administrators agreed or strongly agreed that they used performance data to determine the PD opportunities offered on replication campuses, 68% of campus non-instructional personnel and 59% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that PD was differentiated to address their specific needs.

Because TEA originally prioritized providing technical assistance to district authorizers with CSP funding, technical assistance opportunities for the first two cohorts of CSPHQR operators were somewhat limited. Sixty-four percent of central office administrators and 50% of campus administrators agreed or strongly agreed that they understood what supports were available from TEA to replication campuses. Forty-six percent of central office administrators and 37% of campus administrators agreed or strongly agreed that they accessed support from TEA on a regular basis.

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[6] The term "LEA" refers both to open-enrollment charter schools and to ISDs. The term "campus" refers to the campus-level entity that students attend.

Initial Impact

Preliminary findings indicate that the effect of opening a Cohort I replication campus on school-level state academic accountability ratings was neutral or negative in that accountability ratings stayed the same or decreased from 2018 to 2019.[7] This finding suggests two possible explanations. First, the performance of the replication campus itself may have contributed to the school's academic accountability rating decreasing. Alternatively, the performance of campuses in operation during the 2017–18 school year may have been adversely impacted by the school's efforts to support the Cohort I replication campus (e.g., by losing veteran educators who were shifted to replication campuses or by sacrificing some measure of individualized support from central office administrators responsible for providing shared services to additional campuses). These explanations are not mutually exclusive; a school's attempts to support a struggling replication campus may be insufficient to improve that campus's short-term academic outcomes while nevertheless steering attention and resources away from other campuses.

A descriptive statistical analysis showed that students attending Cohort I replication campuses were outperformed by their peers at non-replication comparison campuses on multiple measures of student performance in 2018–19. This is a key finding, in light of research that shows initial academic data from replication campuses to be predictive of subsequent campus-level performance (Peltason and Raymond, 2013). Both on an overall basis and when disaggregated by student group, students at non-replication comparison campuses were more likely to achieve the Approaches Grade Level standard or better on 2019 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)-Reading, STAAR-Mathematics, STAAR-Algebra I end-of-course (EOC), and STAAR-English I EOC exams.[8]

Overall, students attending non-replication comparison campuses were eight percentage points more likely than students attending replication campuses to achieve the Approaches Grade Level standard or better on the STAAR-Reading exam and seven percentage points more likely on the STAAR-Mathematics exam. Students attending non-replication comparison campuses were 28 percentage points more likely than students attending replication campuses to achieve the Approaches Grade Level standard or better on the STAAR-Algebra I EOC exam and 17 percentage points more likely to achieve the Approaches Grade Level standard or better on the STAAR-English I EOC exam. A PSM analysis showed that the treatment effect of enrollment at a Cohort I campus relative to enrollment at a non-replication comparison campus ranged from -20 to -175 points on STAAR and EOC scale scores and from -0.4 to -12 percentage points on STAAR and EOC proficiency levels.

Increases in per-student instructional expenditures were associated with increases in the percentages of students at Cohort I replication campuses achieving the Approaches Grade Level standard or better on STAAR-Reading and STAAR-Mathematics exams. Increases in the percentages of EL students and students classified as economically disadvantaged in the testing populations at Cohort I replication campuses and non-replication comparison campuses were associated with decreases in the percentage of students achieving the Approaches Grade Level standard or better on STAAR-Reading and STAAR-

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[7] Over the past several years, the state academic accountability system in Texas has experienced many changes. The most significant changes were the transitions to *A* through *F* rating systems for districts in 2017–18 and for campuses in 2018–19. Details regarding the 2018–19 system and its components are available in the TEA 2019 Accountability Manual (https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/2019-accountability-manual).

[8] The Approaches Grade Level standard is a STAAR performance level descriptor indicating that the student is likely to succeed in the next grade or course with targeted academic intervention. The Approaches Grade Level standard serves as the state passing standard.

Mathematics exams. The negative relationship between the percentages of students in these groups in a testing cohort and STAAR proficiency was more pronounced on replication campuses.

Cohort I students were absent from school slightly more frequently than students enrolled at non-replication comparison campuses. Cohort I students were also comparatively more likely to have experienced a disciplinary action during the 2018–19 school year.

Key Takeaways from Replication Campus Operation

Cohort I grantees made a series of adjustments in response to challenges encountered in the 2018–19 school year. Among the areas in which teachers at Cohort I replication campuses identified the emergence of best practices, instruction, professional relationships, and school connectedness were cited most often. Effective campus leadership was the variable most frequently identified by teachers as a key determinant of replication success. Importantly, then, large percentages of central office administrators agreed or strongly agreed that the manner in which they support (84%), prepare (84%), and identify (83%) leaders of replication campuses had improved from 2018–19 to 2019–20.

Survey data indicated that stakeholders believe central office support services became more responsive to campus needs and that campuses became more responsive to the needs of students and families. Central office administrators (84%) were more likely than teachers (79%), campus administrators (74%), or campus non-instructional personnel (73%) to believe that central office support services have become more responsive to campus needs. Teachers affiliated with one of the four open-enrollment charter schools represented in Cohort I expressed significantly less favorable views than teachers at the other three Cohort I schools when surveyed about the extent to which central office support services had become more responsive to their campuses' needs. However, at least 83% of all stakeholder groups — central office administrators, campus administrators, campus non-instructional personnel, teachers, and parents — agreed or strongly agreed that Cohort I campuses had become more responsive to the needs of teachers and students in their second year of operation.

Availability of resources was a recurring theme in teacher responses to open-ended survey items regarding issues and areas where additional supports were needed. Thirty-six percent of teachers cited the availability of resources as an issue that arose during the early stages of their campuses' replication efforts, 45% indicated they would benefit from additional resources from their central offices, and 39% stated that they would benefit from additional resources from TEA.

Promising Practices

Grantees afforded replication campuses varying degrees of autonomy. Regardless of where a school's replication philosophy landed on the standardization/customization continuum, grantees showcased a number of practices that a school might take to increase responsiveness to local considerations while maintaining model fidelity. Schools seeded replication campuses with leaders and teachers familiar with their high-quality models, ensuring consistency and creating opportunities for new teachers to have access to skilled mentors. Additionally, they attempted to define the autonomies that campuses possess and design central office staffing structures, PD offerings, and support models to address campus needs.

Replication campus operators attempted to remedy perceptual disconnects between central offices and campuses by streamlining communication, familiarizing campus leaders with central office personnel prior to the launch of a replication campus, maintaining a consistent and visible on-campus presence after a campus had opened, and ensuring that administrators understood how to navigate central office support infrastructures. Effective communication efforts helped campuses mitigate challenges associated with

replication and establish strong relationships with parents, their central offices, and TEA. Prioritizing parent communication created the foundation upon which campuses were able to co-construct distance-learning programs in collaboration with families during a period of extended school closure.

Quantitative and qualitative data showed that grantees encountered challenges when they attempted to open replication campuses whose demographics, grade configurations, geographical settings, and governance constructs differed from those in place when they earned "high-quality" designations. To navigate these challenges, grantees developed a number of promising strategies. They increased their capacity to diagnose student learning needs, sought to ingrain cultures of feedback and improvement for teachers, and differentiated PD based on needs identified during classroom observations. They redesigned their leadership preparation programs to provide more practical, hands-on learning opportunities for aspiring administrators, and they reexamined their approaches to interfacing with parents and other community members. They created the conditions under which administrators were more likely to use data to inform teaching practices and to customize interventions, afford students greater involvement in the learning process, and establish clear and consistent classroom routines.

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