

Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

Annual Implementation Report

Evaluation of Year 4

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Executive Summary

Now in its fourth 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 2021–22 school year to support college and career readiness for students from low-income schools in Texas.

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 of students consisting of all other students in Grade 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 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.

To implement the programs and services, TEA has partnered with several organizations. TEA has partnered with three non-profit organizations—CFES Brilliant Pathways, Advise TX, and College Advising Corps (CAC)—to implement college and career counseling/advising services at the high school level.¹ 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 TNTP to implement various PD components of the grant.² Finally, TEA has partnered with Texas OnCourse (TXOC) to develop curricula, including the TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program (TXOC Academy).

¹ 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. For more information, please visit <https://brilliantpathways.org/faq-items/what-does-cfes-stand-for/>.

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.

Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

This report presents findings from the implementation study during the fourth year—school year 2021–22 (Year 4)—when the class of 2024 students were in Grade 10 and the priority cohort students were in Grade 9, Grade 11, 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

- **Academic preparedness among students.** Grade 9 priority cohort students who were enrolled in Algebra I generally *Agreed* that they were prepared for the course but reported lower levels of agreement that their Algebra I course was challenging when compared to students from previous years. Additionally, personnel from District 4 shared that student enrollment in dual credit courses increased in Year 4, which could be due to enrollment not being contingent upon meeting a certain Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) score.
- **Tutoring opportunities offered to students.** GEAR UP continued to provide targeted tutoring support to students with a failing grade to succeed academically in Year 4. Participation in tutoring services increased in Year 4, with students receiving tutoring support mainly through after school and in class formats across subject areas. A majority of students who reported participating in tutoring found it to be *Helpful* and were *Satisfied* with tutoring supports they received.
- **Test preparation support.** Participation in test preparation significantly increased in Year 4.³ A majority of student survey respondents in Year 4 reported that the test preparation they received helped them prepare for college entrance examinations, which was a significant increase from Year 3. Additionally, students were more aware of where to find TSIA resources in Year 4 versus Year 3. However, some student site visit participants shared that they felt they were not adequately prepared for the college entrance examinations.
- **Advising services.** In Year 4, although there was a significant increase in students participating in one-on-one advising sessions with their counselor or advisor, student satisfaction with one-on-one counseling sessions significantly decreased. Among parents who were surveyed, parents of class of 2024 students reported higher satisfaction with one-on-one advising compared to those of priority cohort students.
- **College and career readiness activities.** College visits, college and career fairs, and work-based learning activities were offered in addition to advising in Year 4. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related restrictions continued to disrupt college and career

³ Throughout this report, “significance” refers to findings that were determined to be statistically significant through the use of statistical tests.

readiness activities impacting participation levels. Students reported increased satisfaction levels with college visits, but satisfaction levels for work-based learning activities and college fairs decreased in Year 4.

- **Parent activities.** In Year 4, there was a significant increase in parents who reported participating in a parent/family event. Parent satisfaction with parent/family events in Year 4 was of similar levels as in Year 3, with parents of priority cohort students reporting higher satisfaction than the class of 2024 parents. However, class of 2024 parent survey respondents were more likely to plan to attend future events, were more comfortable asking questions, and found the information in the parent/family events to be more helpful.
- **Student and parent awareness.** Despite COVID-19 continuing to restrict GEAR UP activities and services, the most common reason for not participating in college and career advising and exploration initiatives cited by students and parents related to them being unaware that such initiatives were offered.
- **PD and vertical teaming initiatives.** Personnel survey respondents *Agreed* that the PD they participated in provided strategies for increasing rigor and the strategies they acquired to increase their rigor from PD were easy to implement. Similar to Year 3, vertical teaming participants generally *Agreed* with the statement on the personnel survey that the vertical teaming they participated in helped to align curriculum and reduce the need for remediation at the postsecondary level.
- **Sustainability initiatives.** All six participating districts reported sustaining GEAR UP activities for middle school students in follow-on cohorts, with a focus on offering supports for Algebra I and providing individual advising. Some site visit participants expressed concerns regarding sustaining these efforts in the future on account of limited resources.
- **Statewide financial aid initiatives.** A new Texas law went into effect in Year 4 that requires Grade 12 students (beginning in the 2021–22 school year) to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), complete a Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA), or sign an opt-out form in order to graduate high school. TEA developed and disseminated resources to support compliance with the new requirement, including toolkits for families, counselors, and community partners. More than two-thirds (70%) of Texas districts that responded to a statewide survey on the topic indicated they accessed these toolkits or other resources. Respondents reported that they were satisfied with the financial aid resources they used.
- **Grant implementation support.** Site visit participants and others provided reflection on overall implementation of GEAR UP in Year 4. Findings suggest that these supports evolved in Year 4 to meet the needs of GEAR UP coordinators and their districts and were described as helpful.

Promising Practices

Based on an analysis of implementation in Year 4, the evaluation team identified the following set of promising practices:

- **Increase readiness for Algebra I through a summer bridge camp.** The District 3 principal reported organizing a summer bridge camp for students who struggled in the course or test to increase readiness for advanced coursework.
- **Increase awareness of dual credit programs among students and parents through dual credit parent nights.** Dual credit parent nights were provided (in both English and Spanish) for students and parents in District 4 to increase awareness and enrollment in the dual credit program.
- **Assist students with TSIA test preparation through a TSIA boot camp.** TSIA bootcamps were conducted to help students in District 2 prepare for the TSIA. According to a high school counselor, the school had the highest passing rate in the TSIA when they held a bootcamp (this finding was not independently verified by the evaluation team). Similar bootcamps for ACT and SAT test preparation may occur in future years.
- **Use targeted subject lines for college and career messaging to parents.** Parents in District 5 described the necessity of having clear and succinct subject lines in the school's messaging to parents so as to emphasize relevant subjects and/or grades and distinguish it from other messaging from the school.
- **Offer grade-specific parent and family events.** Several districts offered parent and family events specific to a certain grade level in order to provide targeted resources and services for parents and families. District 2 site visit participants explained that these efforts helped tailor topics to the needs of students and parents at that grade level.
- **Utilize a train-the-trainer method to involve school personnel in PD.** Staff from District 6 noted that TNTP utilized a train-the-trainer approach wherein TNTP staff met with school personnel to explain the PD, answer questions, and customize materials to the district. A District 6 coordinator described this approach as helpful to build understanding and buy-in.

Recommendations

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

- **Provide support for Algebra I to combat learning loss and student apathy associated with COVID-19.** Grade 9 priority cohort students reported being more prepared to take Algebra I in Year 4 when compared to Year 3. However, personnel described students as being less prepared for Algebra I and advanced coursework, and also noted apathy among Grade 9 priority cohort students since they were learning in virtual settings for the previous two years. Future efforts may focus on providing academic supports to ensure students from follow-on cohorts succeed in advanced mathematics coursework.
- **Expand access to and clarify requirements for accessing advanced courses.** Participating districts may consider loosening restrictions on qualifying for Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses or potentially opening enrollment for these advanced courses in order to increase access to the courses. All six districts reported offering dual credit courses in Year 4; however, there were variations on how students

could qualify for these courses. In addition, some core content teacher participants in District 1 shared having a limited understanding of how students could qualify for dual credit courses. Possible efforts to increase enrollment in dual credit and AP courses may focus on providing more information on how students can qualify for these courses.

- **Offer check-ins to ensure students are provided appropriate levels of academic rigor in advanced coursework.** Site visit participants cited the necessity of providing appropriate levels of rigor in advanced coursework to ensure students gain confidence in their skill and do not feel defeated. A counselor recommended that students are offered regular check-ins to gauge optimum levels of rigor and provide necessary supports.
- **Continue to offer virtual tutoring as an option.** Providing virtual tutoring services may increase access since this mode of tutoring affords flexibility.
- **Expand opportunities for test preparation for college entrance examination.** Personnel and some students reported that students were not adequately prepared for college entrance examinations. Recommendations for increased test preparation include leveraging existing electives and free periods, embedding test preparation materials within core content courses, and having a dedicated class for test preparation.
- **Investigate the extent to which tutoring initiatives funded through Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports (TCLAS) intersects with GEAR UP targeted tutoring services.** In Year 4, two GEAR UP schools received funds through TCLAS to support tutoring initiatives. Looking ahead, the external evaluation team could explore how tutoring services funded through TCLAS augment GEAR UP tutoring services.
- **Increase awareness of college and career advising and exploration initiatives.** Students and parents cited that the main reason for not being involved in college and career services was being unaware that the services were offered. Recommendations include establishing an annual dissemination plan, offering more methods of communicating, and improving the quality of communication with parents and family.
- **Expand options to new college and career fields available to students.** Personnel recommended including out-of-state universities and non-traditional work-based learning opportunities to expand options for students.
- **Highlight approaches to modify or adapt PD strategies.** While personnel generally agreed that the strategies they acquired to help increase rigor were easy to implement, site visit participants recommended that TNTP provide more support to help teachers adapt or modify strategies and curriculum to meet the specific needs of their students.
- **Clarify the vision for PD as a component of the GEAR UP grant and the role of TNTP in GEAR UP.** TNTP staff noted that some districts chose not to participate or did not seek out PD supports. TEA may wish to clarify for districts how PD supports the vision for GEAR UP as well as TNTP's role in supporting that vision to build buy-in.
- **Leverage existing resources to sustain existing GEAR UP activities and services for follow-on cohorts.** District coordinators recommended leveraging limited resources, through establishing timelines and benchmarks for one-on-one advising sessions, conducting small group advising consisting of two to three students, and involving parents, to sustain GEAR UP efforts for follow-on cohorts.

- **Provide tools and strategies to help school and district staff efficiently track student and parent completion of financial aid forms.** Some respondents of the statewide financial aid survey expressed frustration in comments with the information reflected in the ApplyTexas Counselor Suite. Tools to help school and district staff track completion of these forms may help minimize energy spent contacting students and their parents to determine the status of their forms.
- **Develop resources targeted to students and parents to highlight the requirement to submit financial aid forms and the benefits received from the forms.** Respondents of the statewide financial aid survey reported challenges related to low parental buy-in for the new requirement. Information targeted for students and parents about the requirement and the benefits may help students and parents increase their knowledge and willingness to submit the forms in a timely manner.