



Texas Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Comprehensive Final Grant Evaluation Report: 2016–17 to 2019–20

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Executive Summary

Background

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) awarded a five-year Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The grant is intended to increase national understanding of the charter school model by providing financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools and by expanding the number of high-quality charter schools available to students. The grant program is also intended to increase understanding of the charter school model by evaluating the effects of such schools on student outcomes, staff, and parents. The federal grant guidelines allow a maximum of 18 months for the planning and program design of each charter school and 24 months for the initial implementation of each charter school. In line with these requirements, TEA awarded sub-grants to 50 charter schools, which began serving students during the evaluation period. The first cohort included in the evaluation consisted of nine campuses which received funding from 2016 to 2018, the second cohort consisted of 17 campuses which received funding from 2017 to 2019, the third cohort consisted of 11 campuses which received funding from 2018 to 2020, and the fourth cohort consisted of 13 campuses which received funding from 2019 to 2021.

Program Evaluation

In May 2017, TEA contracted with Safal Partners and their research partners Mathematica and Gibson Consulting Group to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Texas Charter School Program Start-Up Grant. Broadly, the purpose of the evaluation is to identify promising practices exhibited by charter school start-up grantees and established high-performing charter schools across the state, examine student and teacher recruitment and retention strategies within the start-up grantee campuses, and assess the efficacy and impact on students of their enrollment in start-up grantee campuses.¹

To address the research questions related to promising organizational and instructional practices, student recruitment and retention approaches, and teacher recruitment and retention, the evaluation team relied upon annual principal surveys, principal interviews, teacher focus groups, and classroom observations conducted during the 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20 school years. For the student recruitment and retention and teacher recruitment and retention analyses, the evaluation team also analyzed extant data provided by TEA to better understand student and teacher characteristics and mobility patterns. TEA provided student-level, teacher-level, and school-level data, which was used to analyze the relationship between student enrollment at campuses funded through the Texas Public Charter School Start-Up Grant and academic outcomes for students. The promising practices analyses included in this report include campuses from all four cohorts of Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant campuses, and the student outcomes analyses presented in this report include start-up grantee campuses from the first three cohorts.²

¹ Statistical models were used to assess the performance of a sample of 100 high-quality campuses based on standardized test scores (i.e., State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Reading, STAAR-Mathematics for Grades 3–8, and end-of-course (EOC) exam scores for Grades 9–12). Campuses ranked in the top half of the 100 high-quality charter school campuses were categorized as high-performing for the purposes of this evaluation. See Appendix A for additional detail on high-performing schools for the purpose of this evaluation.

² Cohort 4 began serving students in 2019–20 and student outcomes data were not yet available.

Promising Practices from Charter School Start-Up Grantee Campuses

School Start-Up Planning

Principals at new charter school campuses funded through the Public Charter School Start-Up Grant shared their perspectives on practices that contributed to successfully getting their schools up and running. As campuses moved from their first to their third year of serving students, what principals believed to be the most important, effective, or impactful practices evolved in ways that reflected the maturity of the charter school.

- Principals at charter school start-up grantee campuses shared that determining specific school needs and practices and developing processes related to hiring, onboarding, and training new staff were among the most important tasks when getting a school up and running.
 - School leaders at schools in their first year of operations were more inclined to discuss stakeholder communications as a key start-up activity, while principals at campuses in their second and third years were more inclined to elaborate on the importance of hiring and getting staff and teachers up to speed.
 - As charter school campuses matured from their first to third year, principals tended to focus more intensely on improving the quality of instructional practices through the development of effective support systems for teachers.

- According to principals in both open-enrollment and in-district charter start-up grantee campuses, their respective charter management organization (CMOs) or their school districts served in a mentor role for principals, providing support and feedback.³
 - As campuses matured from their first to their third years of serving students, campus principals were more inclined to rate operational support from CMOs and districts as important to their development as a new charter school. This operational support included purchasing supplies and materials and offering curricular support, transportation, and food services for the campuses.

- School leaders reported several challenges related to starting up a new school, including the process of recruiting and enrolling students, staffing their schools, financial issues, securing adequate facilities and supplies, and difficulties with communicating school goals to stakeholders (e.g., parents and students).
 - Principals at campuses in their second and third year of operations were more inclined to discuss the challenges associated with attracting talented educators, especially when enrollment counts were fluctuating.

³In this report the terms open-enrollment charters and in-district charters are used. The term open-enrollment charter school is used to refer to both state authorized charter schools that operate as independent local education agencies (LEAs) with a charter holder governing board (see Texas Education Code (TEC), Chapter 12, Subchapter D), and college, university or junior college charter schools (see TEC, Chapter 12, Subchapter E). These two types of charter schools can enroll students from any school districts in their approved geographic boundaries. The term in-district charter 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).

Organizational Practices

The evaluation explored a number of factors key to organization and management in charter school start-up grantee campuses. These included important practices related to the charter school campus mission and parent involvement with the school and in their child's education. Key findings include the following:

- All charter start-up grantee campuses ranked the following as one of the five most important practices related to executing the campus's mission: using student data to inform instruction, hiring exemplary teachers to support other teachers, maximizing instructional time, and using classroom observations to regularly monitor instructional quality.
 - Concentrating on maximizing instructional time rose in importance as charter schools matured from their first to third year of operation.
- During interviews, principals at charter school start-up grantee campuses stressed the importance of effective and consistent communications with teachers, students, and parents as an important organizational practice.
- Regular individualized teacher-parent communications and the use of a system for parents to monitor student attendance, grades, and progress emerged as the two most commonly noted approaches for principals at charter school start-up grantee campuses to get parents involved in their child's education.
 - Regular individualized communications between teachers and parents was rated as the most effective communication method to engage parents by principals at first-year and second-year charter schools, while parent-teacher conferences was rated as the most effective method for getting parents involved in their child's education by principals at campuses in their third year of operation.

Instructional Practices

Providing support for teachers is critical for charter campuses to continually improve the quality of instruction at their campuses. Key findings related to instructional practices are as follows:

- Regardless of whether a campus was in their first, second or third year of operations, establishing positive relationships between students and teachers, maximizing learning time, and using formative assessment data to guide instruction were all rated by principals as one of the top five most frequently observed and most impactful instructional practices.
- Charter school start-up grantee principals also found the use of hands-on activities in class with a variety of different modalities to be an impactful practice.
- Charter school start-up grantee principals felt that reviewing student performance data with teachers was the most impactful teacher support for improving instruction.
 - As campuses matured from the first to the third year of operation, providing feedback to teachers based on formally scheduled observations was more likely to be rated as one of the most impactful teacher supports.

- Teachers at start-up grantee campuses in their second and third years of operation were more likely to note the frequency and importance of communications and collaboration with other teachers, as well as the use of instructional rounds where they visit the classrooms of other teachers, as important supports.
- Classrooms were observed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which measures effective teacher-student interactions in Pre-K – 12th grade. For three of the four CLASS observational domains (Emotional Support, Instructional Support, and Student Engagement), average CLASS scores were lower in the second year of serving students before rising back to year one levels in their third year of operation.
 - CLASS observation scores for the Classroom Organization domain demonstrated higher average scores as start-up grantee campuses moved from their first to second to third year of serving students.
- When compared to CLASS results at high-performing charter school campuses in Texas, Public Charter School Start-Up Grant recipients received higher CLASS observation scores for the Emotional Support and Student Engagement domains than high-performing charter schools, but lower Instructional Support domain scores.
 - Average Classroom Organization scores for charter school start-up grantee campuses showed continual improvement. They were lower than high-performing charter schools in their first year of operations, comparable in their second year of operations, and higher in their third year.
- Principals felt that a variety of in-class interventions (e.g., small groups, differentiated and individualized instruction), along with strong teacher-student connections and out-of-class in-school interventions (e.g., tutoring labs and targeted pull-out instruction by interventionists), were the most effective approaches to closing the achievement gap for educationally disadvantaged students at risk of dropping out of school.
- Small group instruction in class was rated by principals as the most effective method for closing the achievement gap for persistently low-performing students.
 - As charter start-up grantee campuses matured from the first to the third year of operations, the proportion of principals rating small group instruction as the first or second most impactful approach grew substantially.

School Climate and Staff Morale

In fast-paced charter school environments, keeping campus climate and staff morale positive can be challenging. There are a large number of factors that contribute to high staff morale and the development of a positive campus environment. The evaluation team examined the climate, staff morale, and teaching conditions at charter school start-up grantee campuses and examined differences in results as campuses matured from the first to the third year of operations.

- Across most of the campus climate measures, there was a marked spike in agreement among school leaders between the first and second year of operations, followed by a drop in their third year of serving students. Campus climate measures that followed this pattern include teachers

trusting each other, teachers trusting their principal, a culture of professionalism, value placed on teamwork and collaboration, and staff morale level.

- Whether a campus was in its first, second, or third year of serving students, principals rated teamwork and collaboration highest in terms of agreement.
- Principals felt that demonstration of genuine care for students and academic growth were the two most important factors associated with creating a positive school climate.
- While principals and teachers in all years of operation tended to be in general agreement about there being a positive climate at their campuses, teachers at campuses in their third year of operations were more inclined to express that the climate was poor or negative compared to teachers at campuses in their first or second years of serving students.
- Regardless of their year of operation, the majority of principals felt that working conditions at their start-up grantee campuses were positive. A larger proportion of principals at campuses in their third year of serving students recognized challenges related to heavy workloads, high expectations, and stress on teachers compared to principals at campuses in their first or second years of operation.
 - Smaller percentages of teachers described the working conditions as positive as schools moved from the first to the third year of operation.
 - Increasing percentages of teachers characterized working conditions as challenging due to unrealistic workloads, high expectations, and lack of teacher supports, which resulted in high stress levels for teachers.
- Regardless of whether the charter school start-up grantee campus was in its first, second, or third year of serving students, principals rated developing strong teacher-student relationships, establishing clear behavioral expectations, and engaging students in the classroom as the most impactful approaches to maintaining a positive classroom environment.
- Teachers and principals stressed the development of relationships with students, consistency in behavioral expectations, restorative discipline practices, parent communications, and positive reinforcement as effective practices for reducing student behavioral issues.

Impact of Student Enrollment at Charter School Start-Up Grantee Campuses

This part of the evaluation estimated the effects of enrollment in charter school start-up grantee campuses on State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)-Reading, STAAR-Mathematics, Algebra I end-of-course (EOC), and English I EOC exams. To facilitate comparisons across schools, test scores were standardized across each subject, grade, and year using information from the entire Texas student population. Results presented in these standardized units can be described, relative to the standard deviation of the overall test score distribution, as standard deviation units. Students who attended charter school start-up grantee campuses during the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years were matched with students at traditional public school campuses in order to identify a group of students enrolled in traditional public school campuses who shared similar prior test scores and other student and school characteristics. Statistical models that controlled for differences in student characteristics

and prior academic achievement were used to estimate the effect of enrollment at a charter school start-up grantee campus on student academic outcomes.

The evaluation looked at outcomes for students enrolled in Cohort 1, Cohort 2, and Cohort 3 charter school start-up grantee campuses. No consistent positive or negative impact was found as a result of attending grantee charter schools.

- At the elementary school level, there were individual charter school start-up grantee campuses in Cohort 2 and 3 that showed statistically significant differences, some positive and some negative, in STAAR-Mathematics and STAAR-Reading test results when compared to matched students enrolled in traditional public schools after controlling for student differences.
- At the middle school level, there were individual charter school start-up grantee campuses in all three cohorts that showed statistically significant differences, some positive and some negative.
- For Algebra I and English I EOC exams for students enrolled in high school grantee campuses, after controlling for differences in student and school characteristics, the overall average effect for the English I EOC exam across the two Cohort 2 high school campuses was significantly positive in 2017–18.
- When comparing the overall STAAR-Mathematics and STAAR-Reading test results for charter school start-up grantee campuses to the results for those campuses for different student groups, for each student group and grade range the average results for each student group across all campuses in that grade range are not statistically different from the average results for all students in that grade range. The consistency of results across student groups indicates that the overall results are not driven by the performance of any particular student group.

Student Recruitment and Retention Practices at Charter School Start-Up Grantee Campuses

The analyses of start-up grantee campus principal survey data, principal interview data, and teacher focus group data from 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20 were used to describe the approaches used by start-up grantee campuses to attract, recruit, admit, enroll, serve, and retain students. The evaluation team also analyzed extant data to create tables related to the characteristics of students enrolled at start-up grantee campuses, as well as enrollment and attrition patterns for students. Principals at campuses funded through the Charter School Program Start-Up Grant were asked in annual surveys to rank the most effective recruitment methods for attracting students to enroll at their charter school. Key findings are as follows:

- Word-of-mouth advertising from parents of students currently enrolled at the school was ranked by principals as the most effective methods for recruiting students to their new charter school campus.
 - While this was rated as the most effective recruitment method by all principals, it was rated as one of the two most effective methods of student recruitment more commonly by school leaders in the second and third years of operation.

- The use of social media to advertise the new charter school was more prominent at schools in their first and second years of operation, while open houses to share information about the campuses were ranked as more effective by principals at campuses in their third year of serving students.
- When asked about their target population for student recruitment, principals most commonly indicated they were either open-enrollment with no specific target populations or that their target populations were based on a geographic boundary.
 - For principals who did mention specific student populations for recruitment, the most commonly noted student groups were economically disadvantaged students, students interested in a particular field or career path (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) academy), and students who were struggling in traditional public school environments.
- For principals at start-up grantee campuses in their second or third year of serving students, the building of meaningful relationships between teachers and students, the establishment of a safe and collaborative environment, the academic growth of students, the delivery of student-centered instruction, and effective communications between teachers and parents were ranked as the five most effective approaches for retaining students from one year to the next.
- Teachers at charter school start-up grantee campuses also discussed how they play a role in student retention by establishing positive relationships with parents and students, and by delivering high-quality instruction. Student happiness, a sense of belonging, and the availability of extracurricular activities were also cited by teachers as important drivers for student retention.
- The vast majority of students enrolled at charter school start-up grantee campuses in 2017–18 (91%) or 2018–19 (92%) remained in that campus the entire school year.
 - Of those who transferred during either school year, approximately 63% went to traditional public schools while 17% of those who transferred enrolled at a different charter school campus.
- The majority (78%) of students enrolled at charter school start-up grantee campuses in 2017–18 or 2018–19 also returned to that campus for the next school year.
 - Of those that transferred, 55% left for a traditional public school and 28% attended a different charter school during the next school year.
 - Students who left a start-up grantee campus during the summer of 2018 were more likely to be white and African American and less likely to be Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, or an English language learner when compared to students who continued in that school in 2019–20.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Practices at Charter School Start-Up Grantee Campuses

The evaluation team also analyzed principal survey data, principal interview data, and CSP teacher focus group data from 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20 to describe the methods by which start-up grantee campuses attract, recruit, and retain highly-qualified instructors. Recruiting and retaining high-quality educators is important when developing a new charter school campus or expanding an existing campus, as it is critical to support enrollment increases or an expansion of the grades served. With this in mind, the evaluation examined a variety of issues related to recruiting and retaining high-quality educators at charter school start-up grantee campuses, including: 1) methods for attracting high-quality educators; 2) criteria for hiring teachers; 3) methods for retaining high-quality teachers; and 4) measures used to decide on whether or not to retain teachers.

- While principals shared a wide array of effective teacher recruitment methods, they consistently rated word-of-mouth advertising about the school and current teachers recruiting colleagues as the most effective teacher recruitment strategies.
 - The use of social media to recruit teachers was more prominent among first-year campuses, and the use of current teachers to recruit colleagues became more prominent as campuses matured from the first to the third year of operation.
- Passion for teaching, teacher fit with the mission of the campuses, and strong demonstrated pedagogical skills were rated by principals as the three most important considerations when hiring new teachers.
 - As campuses matured from the first to the third year of serving students, the need for teachers with strong demonstrated pedagogical skills rose in importance as a hiring criterion.
- Principals at charter school start-up grantee campuses in their first and second years of serving students rated regular feedback to teachers regarding instructional practices and dedicated planning time as the two most effective approaches to retaining high-quality teachers.
 - For principals at third-year charter schools, dedicated planning time was the top-ranked teacher retention approach, followed by incentive pay based on student and/or school performance metrics.
- When it came to teacher retention, principals and teachers alike emphasized identification with the school culture as an important consideration for teachers when they are deciding whether to return to teach at a campus for another year.
- Regardless of the maturity of the charter start-up grantee campus, principals shared that instructional effectiveness (i.e., teaching methods) is by far the most important consideration when deciding whether to retain a teacher, followed by the academic performance of students in a teacher’s classroom, student engagement in class, and the teacher’s cultural fit with the campus.

- The two-year teacher retention rate at charter school start-up grantee campuses was 16 percentage points lower than it was for teachers working at comparable traditional public school campuses (57% vs. 73%).
- Teachers at start-up grantee campuses who left their 2017–18 and 2018–19 teaching positions were approximately twice as likely to transition to a different role at their campus when compared to teachers who left their teaching position at traditional public school campuses.
- Teachers at start-up grantee campuses are typically younger, have fewer years of teaching experience, are more likely to be first-year teachers, and have less tenure at their school than their counterparts at traditional public school campuses.

Best or Promising Practices from High-Performing Charter School Campuses

The study investigated promising practices in place at high-performing charter school campuses. The evaluation relied primarily on survey data collected from charter school principals statewide in spring 2018 and data collected through interviews with school principals, focus groups with teachers, and classroom observations. The study then utilized the data from high-performing charter school campuses compared to other established charter school campuses not identified as high-performing to assess differences in practices between these two groups of schools.

Differentiating characteristics of high-performing charter schools were identified as potential best or promising practices that could be emulated by other charter school campuses across the state. These survey findings were further supplemented with interview data collected from school leaders and teachers at high-performing charter schools. The results are organized by organizational practices, instructional practices, and practices that contribute to the establishment of a positive school climate. A detailed description of the analysis and its findings were originally presented in the [Texas Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant Evaluation Report: 2016–17 and 2017–18](#), and are presented again in this report.