

High School Success Pilot Program

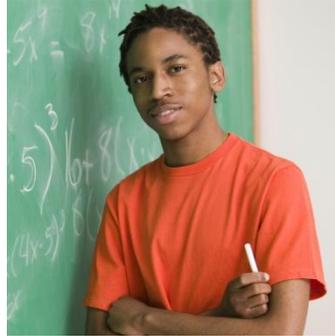
Collaborative Dropout Reduction Pilot Program

Interim Report #1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

December 2010

Submitted to:
Texas Education Agency



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Submitted by:
ICF International

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Executive Summary

This interim evaluation report presents findings from the first year of the evaluation of the Collaborative Dropout Reduction pilot program (Collaborative), which corresponds to the 2008-09 school year. The Collaborative is one of three grant programs grouped together as the High School Success Pilot Programs (HSSPP). The other two programs are the Intensive Summer Programs pilot program (ISP) and the Mathematics Instructional Coaches pilot program (MIC). Collectively, these three grant programs were authorized and funded by the Texas Legislature in 2007 so awarded districts could develop and implement projects to prevent and reduce dropout, increase high school success, and improve college and career readiness in public schools.

The consequences of a student's decision to drop out of school can have serious and negative ramifications for both the individual and society as a whole. Texas has taken a number of steps to reduce the dropout rate, increase graduation rates and college and career readiness, and involve multiple stakeholders in these efforts. Just as the decision to drop out is influenced by multiple and interrelated personal, demographic, social, and school-based factors, the Collaborative grant program was designed to be multi-faceted and involve cooperation among schools, individuals, and organizations from outside of the traditional school community to provide effective interventions and services to students at risk of dropping out of school.

Program Goals

The Collaborative was designed to provide grantees opportunities to create a new local dropout reduction program or to expand/enhance an existing program.¹ The purpose of the Collaborative is to foster collaborations with local businesses, other local governments or law enforcement agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, and institutions of higher education to deliver proven, research-based dropout intervention services.

"I believe this program is great for kids like myself who only need a little push to continue successfully in life."

-Collaborative Student

The specific goals of the Collaborative include:

- Increasing the number of students graduating from high school;
- Reducing the number of students who drop out of school in the community;
- Increasing students' job skills;
- Increasing students' employment opportunities;
- Providing continuing education opportunities for students who might otherwise have dropped out of school, including dropout recovery and re-entry programs;
- Preparing students to graduate college-ready;
- Sustaining dropout reduction and recovery strategies beyond the grant program; and
- Providing models of effective community-based dropout prevention and recovery efforts to serve as guides in developing future program and policy initiatives in the areas of dropout prevention and serving at risk students.

Program Evaluation

TEA contracted with ICF International to conduct an evaluation of the Collaborative program. The comprehensive evaluation approach was designed to address the following objectives:

¹ For more information about the Collaborative, please visit TEA's website for the program at: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3690>.

- Evaluate the implementation of Collaborative instructional strategies and programs.
- Evaluate the impact of the Collaborative program on student outcomes.
- Evaluate the impact of the Collaborative program on students' career readiness skills (e.g., ethical workplace behaviors).
- Assess the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the Collaborative program.

The evaluation began in September 2008 and is scheduled to end in April 2011. Major deliverables of this evaluation include this interim evaluation report and a second evaluation report scheduled for delivery to the Texas Legislature in January 2011.

“This is a very good program because it’s a second opportunity for students.”

-Collaborative Student

This interim evaluation report is designed to provide a detailed accounting of evaluation findings during the 2008-09 school year for Cycle 1 Collaborative grantees, the first year of implementation. This report also provides a preliminary overview of proposed implementation activities for Cycle 2 Collaborative grantees, which began in the 2009-10 school year. Although some outcome data are not available at the time of this writing (e.g., dropout, graduation, promotion, and course completion rates), the report nonetheless provides preliminary evidence for the Collaborative program and sets the stage for Interim Report #2. Interim Report #2, which will be released in January 2011, will include data from the 2009-10 school year. It will provide a more complete picture of the implementation, impact, and cost effectiveness/sustainability of Cycle 1 grantees; and a “full picture” of implementation, but only a “partial picture” of impact and cost effectiveness/sustainability of Cycle 2 grantees.

Grantees

Although there were six Collaborative grantees funded in Cycle 1, only five grantees that served 13 campuses were covered in Year 1 findings. One grantee was impacted by a natural disaster and did not implement the program with fidelity in the 2008-09 school year.²

Cycle 1 grantees were located in three general areas of the state:

- Brownsville (Brownsville Independent School District [ISD] and Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District [CISD])
- San Antonio (School of Excellence in Education and Edgewood ISD)
- Houston (Houston ISD).

In addition, there were 16 Cycle 2 grantees located in 31 campuses across the state that implemented the Collaborative grant. This cohort included the following grantee districts: Austin ISD, Carrizo Springs CISD, Corsicana ISD, Dallas ISD, Dallas Can! Academy Charter, Del Valle ISD, Everman ISD, George Gervin Academy Charter School, Harlandale ISD, McAllen ISD, Palestine ISD, Pasadena ISD, Plainview ISD, San Antonio ISD, Snyder ISD, and Spring Branch ISD.

Collaborative grantees offered a diverse set of services to student participants. As with most dropout prevention programs, Collaborative grantees did not focus on a particular service area or strategy; rather, they focused on a large number of risk factors that may influence a student’s decision to drop out of school.

² Hurricane Ike made landfall on September 13, 2008 and forced the closure of one Collaborative grantee’s school system for an extended period of time. The grantee was able to implement their Collaborative program in the spring of 2009, and is expected to continue services in the 2009-10 school year.

Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 grantees must address four required service areas:

- *Workforce skill development*, which includes paid employment, internship opportunities, and advanced career and vocational training for participating students.
- *Academic support*, which includes tutoring programs, credit recovery, academic acceleration, active learning strategies, career and technical education, and software to enhance student learning.
- *Attendance improvement*, which includes truancy and attendance intervention and incentive programs, school attachment, and positive behavior support.
- *Student and family support*, which includes addressing the social, emotional, and personal needs of students and their families.

Findings from the Implementation Study: Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 Grantees

The Collaborative grant program was reaching schools with a large population of students at high risk of dropping out. The majority of the student population at the 13 campuses implementing Cycle 1 projects and the 31 campuses implementing Cycle 2 projects was identified as at risk of dropping out (73%) and economically disadvantaged (88%).³ Compared to statewide averages, most Collaborative schools had higher mobility and dropout rates, as well as a larger proportion of students enrolled in special education.

“Parents are really in contact with the program because they understand how important the program is for their children.”

-Staff Member

Collaborative Cycle 1 grantees made significant accomplishments and faced a number of challenges in the implementation of their programs. Key facilitators and barriers to program implementation were identified, based on interviews with Collaborative program staff and partners:

Facilitators to implementation included:

- *Diversity in programming*: Diversity in the services provided by Collaborative grantees suggests recognition that students had complex, interrelated problems that required multiple interventions. There is rarely a “magic bullet” in turning a child’s life around. It is a complex process that requires hard work, and given the fact that every child is different, offering a wide array of services maximizes a program’s chances of success.
- *Cultural competence*: Collaborative grantees were working in highly diverse areas with at risk populations. It was evident from the grantee applications and interviews that Collaborative grantees understood the importance of cultural competence,⁴ especially as it related to engaging both students and their families in dropout prevention efforts. For example, one grantee engaged in outreach in both Spanish and English to ensure that parents understood the value of the Collaborative program.
- *Good communication*: Case study findings suggested that solid relationships and regular communication between collaborative partners, school staff, and the district facilitated program implementation. All Cycle 1 grantees mentioned that clear and effective communication strategies were established and maintained during the first year of programming.

³ In order to be classified by TEA as at risk for dropping out, a student must meet one of 13 criteria (e.g., homeless, pregnant). A full definition of at risk can be found at: <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/glossary.html>.

⁴ Cultural competence refers to the ability to effectively interact with people of different cultures.

Barriers to implementation included:

- *Coordination of a large number of partners:* Given that the average Collaborative grantee had 5.6 outside partnerships, tracking those partnerships and coordinating services proved to be a challenge in some cases. For example, one grant coordinator reported feeling stretched thin in providing services from a number of partners across a number of sites.
- *Parent participation:* Some grantees reported that parents of participating students were not supportive of the Collaborative program. In multiple grantee locations, parents were reported to lack understanding of how specific Collaborative initiatives would help their children (e.g., providing students with the opportunity to attend college). To overcome this barrier, grantees invited parents to attend seminars, workshops, and college and/or career fairs.
- *Poor economic conditions:* Collaborative grantees had to scale back their implementation of paid jobs programs due to poor economic conditions. Because many of the skills that Collaborative students need to be college and career ready depended upon hands-on experience, it may have been more challenging for grantees to show positive effects in areas such as ethical workplace behaviors, technological knowledge, and leadership skills.
- *Natural disasters:* Houston and Port Arthur were impacted by Hurricane Ike. Both districts got off to a slower start than anticipated because schools were closed for two weeks in Houston and four weeks in Port Arthur at the beginning of the 2008-09 school year. Houston was able to begin implementation shortly after schools were open, while Port Arthur experienced a much longer delay in program implementation (and has been excluded from this report on 2008-09 activities).

"I am very thankful about having joined Collaborative. It has given me a lot of helpful information about what to do for myself and get ready for college."

-Collaborative Student

Findings from Student Outcome Analyses: Cycle 1 Grantees

Student participants' scores from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) from the baseline year (2007-08) were compared to scores from the end of the first year of Collaborative implementation (2008-09) for reading, math, and science. Data were available for 424 Collaborative students on TAKS math, 414 students on TAKS reading, and 197 students on TAKS science.⁵ Key findings include:

- ***Collaborative students' proficiency in TAKS math significantly improved between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years; however, these improvements only slightly outpaced trends in statewide averages.*** The percentage of Collaborative students who met standards in TAKS math increased 7 percentage points, from 42% in 2007-08 to 49% in 2008-09. The improvements made by Collaborative students in TAKS math slightly outpaced gains by at risk high school students in Texas, who increased TAKS math proficiency by 5 percentage points (i.e., from 44% to 49%) during the same period. Across Texas, high school students reported a 4 percentage point increase in meeting TAKS math standards, from 66% in 2007-08 to 70% in 2008-09.

⁵ Altogether, 913 students were served by the Collaborative, so these findings represent less than half of the students served. Valid data were not available in many cases because (a) students took an alternative form of the TAKS, or (b) students did not have valid data for both time points, which may be due to a variety of factors such as being absent on test day, exempt due to LEP status, or if the student moved out of state.

- Collaborative students' proficiency on TAKS reading was slightly higher between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, but these gains mirrored statewide trends.** The percentage of Collaborative students who met standards in TAKS reading increased from 73% in 2007-08 to 76% in 2008-09. This increase of 3 percentage points was marginally significant ($p < .10$); however, at risk high school students across Texas also achieved a 3 percentage point improvement in TAKS reading proficiency over the same period (i.e., from 77% to 80%). The statewide average of high school students meeting TAKS standards also increased by 3 percentage points, from 86% in 2007-08 to 89% in 2008-09.
- Collaborative students' proficiency in TAKS science significantly improved between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, and these improvements outpaced statewide trends among both high school students overall and at risk high school students.** The percentage of Collaborative students who met standards in TAKS science increased from 32% in 2007-08 to 57% in 2008-09. This increase of 26 percentage points among Collaborative students was significantly higher than the 5 percentage point increase in TAKS science proficiency among at risk students in Texas. The percentage of at risk high school students who met standards in TAKS science increased from 52% in 2007-08 to 57% in 2008-09. Likewise, gains among Collaborative students in TAKS science proficiency also significantly outpaced statewide trends among all high school students. Across Texas, 71% of high school students met standards in TAKS science in 2007-08, increasing by 4 percentage points to 75% in 2008-09.

“Some kids are pushing other students to participate. Before, students didn’t have the self-esteem or the communications skills to do this.”

-Project Director

Collaborative staff at four of the five grantee locations indicated that they had seen noticeable improvements in students' academic performance. Through a number of initiatives designed to improve academic achievement, including cross-age tutoring programs, dual credit courses, flexible scheduling, tutoring, and academic advisory services, Collaborative grantees may have been responsible for these improvements. Grantees attributed their initiatives to improvements in students' grades, more time-on-task as a result of fewer behavioral problems, and exposure to new ways of learning. In particular, grantees' focus on technical education may in part explain the significant improvements in science proficiency. Although our research methods cannot prove that Collaborative initiatives caused improvements in academic performance, there is both qualitative and quantitative support for this finding.

“Some of the students have families of their own and if we can touch this generation of students, they will be good role models for their kids.”

-Administrator

Findings from the Collaborative Student Survey and Stakeholder Survey

A survey was administered to Collaborative students in April 2009 to capture information on perceptions of program effectiveness, future plans, and other outcomes such as stronger technological knowledge, ethical workplace behaviors, increased leadership skills, and improved oral and written communications skills. The ICF team also surveyed 55 stakeholders (e.g., teachers, grant coordinators, principals) about these outcomes during site visits to all five Collaborative grantees in the spring of 2009.

Collaborative students reported that the program was particularly effective in helping them attend class regularly, prepare for college, and learn independently. Moreover, the majority of students (53%) indicated that they plan to attend a 4-year college or university. The majority of the Collaborative stakeholders surveyed also indicated that the program has been “somewhat successful” or “very successful” in improving students' technological knowledge (66%), ethical

workplace behaviors (80%), leadership skills (80%), and oral and written communications skills (75%).

Findings from Cost Analyses

The five Cycle 1 grantees served a total of 913 students during the first nine months of the grant award period (through April 30, 2009) and expended a total of \$427,720 during this reporting period, which resulted in an actual program cost per student of \$468.

Conclusions and Next Steps for the Collaborative Program

Five of the six Cycle 1 Collaborative grantees implemented their programs as expected in the first year of the program, and preliminary findings indicated that Collaborative students were improving on TAKS math, TAKS reading, and TAKS science. Qualitative findings from Collaborative stakeholders generally supported the presence of positive effects in academic achievement. Moreover, Collaborative stakeholders noted perceiving improvements in students' ethical workplace behaviors, technological knowledge, leadership skills, and oral and written communications skills. Perceptions were generally mixed on whether the Collaborative program was influencing dropout rates, enhancing family support, and improving ethical workplace behaviors. Regardless, there was universal agreement among stakeholders that the Collaborative was making a difference for at risk students.

As additional data become available from both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 grantees, the evaluation team will continue to expand and refine these findings. The availability of school-level TAKS results in the fall of 2009 will allow the evaluation team to complete the quasi-experimental study to determine whether Cycle 1 Collaborative grantees had stronger outcomes over schools within the same district that did not implement the Collaborative. This analysis to be reported in Interim Report #2 will constitute the first rigorous assessment of the program's effects.