

Texas A&M University System's Support Activities Related to
the Limited English Proficient
Student Success Initiative

Evaluation Report
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In June 2004 the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provided grants totaling approximately \$4.8 million to the Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) and Texas A&M – Corpus Christi (TAMU - CC) to provide technical assistance and support to Limited English Proficient Student Success Initiative (LEP SSI) grant recipients. This initiative was designed in response to the growing enrollment of limited English proficient (LEP) students in the state and the low performance of these students, as compared to all students, on standardized assessments.

Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that children with limited English proficiency “attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet” (NCLB, 2001). According to the legislation, school districts must take specific steps to ensure that students with limited English proficiency meet the same standards that all students must meet. The 78th Texas Legislature adopted SB1108 which amended the Texas Education Code Sections 21.456 and 39.024(d)-(e) to provide for such assistance. Through this legislation, intensive programs of instruction, training materials, and other teacher training resources were provided to assist teachers in developing the expertise required to enable LEP students to meet state performance expectations.

The goals of the LEP SSI project were to:

- Increase academic achievement of LEP students as demonstrated through improved TAKS scores, growth in English reading proficiency, grade promotion, and increased rates of secondary credit accrual; and
- Increase the number of teachers prepared to enable LEP students to meet state performance expectations through training in LEP instruction and reduction of LEP teachers teaching under a Bilingual exception or ESL waiver.

Approximately \$18 million was awarded to a total of 69 LEP SSI grantees in three funding cycles: 20 Cycle 1 awards (Grant period: May 2004 – May 2006), 34 Cycle 2 awards (Grant period: June 2005 – May 2007), and 15 Cycle 3 awards (Grant period: February 2006 – August 2007). The majority of grant awards went to school districts, which served multiple campuses. Four Education Service Centers (ESCs) were among those receiving awards in the Cycle 1 (three ESCs) and Cycle 2 (one ESC) funding periods. The ESCs subsequently provided funding to school districts within their regions needing assistance with LEP student populations on their campuses. Award amounts ranged between \$180,000 and \$425,000 for Cycle 1 grants. For Cycle 2, award amounts were between \$86,000 and \$500,000; for Cycle 3, the range was \$99,000 to \$500,000.

The first year of TAMUS support coincided with the Cycle 1 grant awards. The LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant period ran from May 2004 to May 2006. During that period of time, TAMUS established the Institute for Second Language Achievement (ISLA) at Texas

A&M–Corpus Christi as a primary means for providing assistance to LEP SSI grant recipients. An online English as a Second Language (ESL) certification preparation course based at Texas A&M–College Station was also offered through their Education Department.

In March 2005, TEA contracted with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to conduct an evaluation of the TAMUS support activities related to the LEP SSI Cycle 1 recipients. The evaluation was to review the content and delivery of the TAMUS online ESL certification preparation course and the effectiveness of TAMUS’ technical assistance and professional development services to Cycle 1 grant recipients. A report on these activities was submitted to TEA in April 2006 (*Texas A&M University System’s Support Activities Related to Limited English Proficient Student Success Initiative Cycle 1 Grants – Final Evaluation Report*), and included recommendations for the continued evaluation of the project as follows:

- An expert review of the ISLA summer ESL institute content
- Perceptions of participants to the online certification course
- Continued perceptions of participants of the ISLA institute
- An examination of the full spectrum of support services offered by TAMUS
- Site visits to a sample of LEP SSI grant recipients to assess their perceptions of support received by TAMUS
- An examination of the certification rates of teachers from LEP SSI grant districts in comparison to the state average

In April 2006, TEA elected to extend the evaluation of the LEP SSI contract, expanding the scope of work to also examine the influence of the project on Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 grant recipients. The objectives for the expanded scope of work were to:

- 1) describe the services provided by ISLA and the four outreach centers that have been awarded sub-grants from TAMUS and assess the quality of those services;
- 2) examine the quality, usefulness, and effects of the support and services provided by TAMUS/ISLA; and
- 3) examine the relationship between participation in TAMUS/ISLA trainings and rates of ESL/bilingual teacher certification in Cycle 1, Cycle 2, and Cycle 3 grantee teachers, and state certification rates.

SEDL’S EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS

The evaluation was designed to look at the types and quality of services provided to grantees and the impact of those services. SEDL’s evaluation collected data regarding the quality and effectiveness of the TAMUS support to LEP SSI grant recipients using a mixed method design that included both qualitative and quantitative data. The evaluation study was guided by the following questions:

- (1) Support services provided by TAMUS/ISLA
 - a. What services have been provided?
 - b. To what extent are campus needs assessment data used to guide services?

- c. To what extent are campus implementation plans being developed and implemented for target campuses?
- (2) Quality, usefulness, and effects of support services
 - a. To what extent do ISLA seminars and the TAMUS online course reflect best practices and standards for ESL and bilingual teaching and learning?
 - i. Content
 - ii. Design and delivery
 - b. To what extent are teachers implementing the content and instructional strategies learned through ISLA seminars and the TAMUS online course?
 - c. What factors have contributed to or hindered implementation?
 - d. What teacher and student effects have resulted from TAMUS/ISLA support and services?
 - (3) Relationship between TAMUS/ISLA support services and success in passing ESL/bilingual certification exams
 - a. To what extent do teachers who attend ISLA supplemental certification seminars take and pass the certification exam?
 - b. To what extent do teachers who take the TAMUS online certification preparation course take and pass the certification exam?
 - c. How do certification rates of LEP SSI grantee teachers participating in TAMUS/ISLA trainings compare to state certification rates?

Methods for data collection included the following:

- **Expert Reviews** of two ISLA-sponsored professional development trainings to determine how the content and delivery compare to promising practices in ESL content and instruction. Excerpts from the review of the online certification preparation course¹ are also included.
- **Surveys** of participants of the ISLA Certification Institute and of teachers who took the TAMUS online certification preparation course to determine their perceptions of the quality of the trainings, usefulness, and effects of those trainings.
- **Site Visit Interviews** conducted with staff at a sample of grantee districts and schools to examine perceptions of the extent that TAMUS/ISLA support and services have resulted in improvements in ESL teaching and learning. Two Cycle 1 sites and one Cycle 2 site were selected for visits, chosen based on their and the evaluation consultant's availability during the month of March 2007.
- **Document Review** of ISLA and outreach center files to compile a description of the types of services and support provided to LEP SSI grantees.
- **Participation and Certification Data Analyses** to determine the extent that teachers who attended the ISLA certification preparation institute or who took the

¹ An expert review of the online certification preparation course was conducted as part of the April 2006 evaluation report of Cycle 1 grant recipients. Excerpts from the original report are provided as part of this report, with the entire summary report provided in Appendix C.

online certification preparation course passed the ESL/bilingual certification exam, and a comparison of those rates with state certification passing rates.

Key findings from the evaluation, organized around the evaluation questions, are presented below.

KEY FINDINGS

TAMUS/ISLA Support Services

Description of Services Provided

The first year of the grant awarded to TAMUS and TAMU – CC (beginning June 2004) was described by ISLA staff as a planning year with TEA, and activities were devoted to setting up the ISLA offices, hiring staff, meeting with the project advisory committee, creating the project Web site, and designing a needs assessment process for Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 grant recipients. In addition, because the first year overlapped with the first cycle of funding to grantees, TAMUS' goal with those grantees was to establish relationships. ISLA staff also established outreach centers at Texas A&M University–Commerce, Texas A&M International University at Laredo, and Texas A&M University–Kingsville.

Data from a document review of ISLA records indicated that support and services included the following:

- The ISLA Web site, established during its first year and currently maintained and updated by ISLA on a regular basis;
- Web site resources including ESL/bilingual information, documents, and resources for administrators, teachers, students, and parents, such as ESL instructional strategies, documents on best practices, needs assessment and planning instruments, and notices of upcoming professional development opportunities;
- A variety of professional development workshops, symposia, and institutes developed and presented throughout the state to LEP SSI Cycle 1, Cycle 2, and Cycle 3 grantees. Professional development content included ESL certification preparation, information on ESL best practices, sheltered instruction training, and numerous sessions devoted to ESL instructional strategies in various areas;
- Site visits to grantee districts and schools, both at the request of grantees for specific professional development or technical assistance and to monitor grantees' progress related to their implementation plans and goals and discuss future needed support.

Data from evaluator site visits to three grantee districts indicated that support and services included:

- assistance in curriculum planning;
- opportunities to attend numerous professional development sessions, ESL certification trainings, and newcomer programs; and
- teaching and learning resources provided by their districts and the ISLA Web site.

Grantee Needs Assessments and Implementation Plans

Grant awards were received through the school districts. Funds were then allocated to campuses within the districts based on the districts' implementation plans. Funding was also used to support district-level program components, when needed. A review of ISLA documents, interviews with ISLA staff, and evaluator interviews at three grantee sites indicated the following:

- Cycle 1 grantees were not required by TEA to submit needs assessments, but all 34 Cycle 2 and 15 Cycle 3 grantees submitted needs assessments to ISLA staff;
- All Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 grantees also submitted implementation plans based on stated needs in their districts and schools;
- ISLA staff reviewed Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 grantee documents, providing consultation on aligning implementation plans with district/campus needs when necessary;
- Cycle 1 grantees developed implementation plans independent from ISLA as they received their grant awards during the time that ISLA was establishing itself;
- ISLA used implementation plans to target services to grantees, particularly Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 grantee districts/schools; however, in establishing relationships with Cycle 1 grantees, ISLA also strived to provide support based on the grantees' extant implementation plans and requests for services aligned with those plans; and
- Interviews with the three grantees selected for site visits indicated that their plans were being implemented effectively with the support provided by TAMUS/ISLA.

Quality, Usefulness, and Effects of TAMUS/ISLA Support Services

Expert reviews, survey, and site visit data were collected to examine the extent that ISLA services and support have contributed to improvements in districts' and schools' capacity to serve their LEP student populations. Expert reviews examined the quality of TAMUS/ISLA professional development and the alignment of the professional development with content and design standards reflecting best practices in ESL teaching and learning. Survey and site visit data examined grantees' perceptions of the quality, usefulness, and effects of TAMUS/ISLA professional development, resources, and other support services. Included were perceptions of the extent of implementation of knowledge and skills gained from TAMUS/ISLA support, factors that facilitated and/or hindered implementation of new knowledge and skills, and perceived teacher and student outcomes.

Expert Reviews: Extent Seminars and Online Course Reflect Best Practices and Standards for ESL and Bilingual Teaching and Learning

Expert reviewers determined that the content of the ISLA seminars and the TAMUS online course:

- was well-grounded in current research on ESL/bilingual instruction;
- was based on sound ESL educational and language learning theory;
- used practical and effective strategies easily transferable to classroom settings; and
- was aligned with national standards for ESL teaching and learning, and standards for certification from the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) and

Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES), preparing teachers for both classroom instruction and ESL certification.

Reviewers also indicated that the design and delivery of the professional development

- adhered to most of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) standards for professional development;
- emphasized curriculum-centered and standards-based content;
- used and provided a variety of research-based instructional strategies, collaborative processes, and student assessments; and
- modeled teaching methods and provided hands-on, engaging activities to achieve effective learning environments.

Reviewers also noted areas that were not aligned with NSDC standards for professional development. ISLA institute and conference trainings, while spanning multiple days, did not provide follow-up sessions for reflection and feedback on implementation issues, which is cited by the NSDC as a critical component in the effective implementation of new knowledge and skills. However, several of the survey respondents and site visit interviewees commented that their schools had used some of the LEP SSI funds for ESL specialists, who worked with teachers on the implementation of ESL strategies. While follow-up sessions were not offered for reflection/feedback, school-based follow-up with ESL specialists for teachers was available.

With respect to the online certification preparation course, reviewers noted several limitations in the design and delivery, including the absence of activities that foster the development of an online learning community and the need for better organization and presentation of the content. However, since the review of the online course was submitted (April 2006), TAMUS staff indicated that modifications have occurred based on recommendations offered in that report. The revisions to the online course were not examined in this evaluation.

Quality, Usefulness, and Effects of the ISLA Trainings and the TAMUS Online Course

Survey and site visit data indicated that teachers who attended ISLA trainings and/or took the online course found them useful in improving their instructional practices with their LEP students. Teachers and administrators reported the increased use of:

- learning centers with ESL students;
- technology incorporated into lessons;
- cultural activities embedded in lessons;
- more small group activities with LEP students; and
- instruction and assessment primarily provided in English.

A number of teachers and administrators noted (in site visits and in open-ended survey responses) an increased awareness of how to help their LEP students as a result of attending workshop/training sessions that focused on second language acquisition, ESL methodology and instructional strategies, and assessing LEP students' English proficiency.

Factors Facilitating Implementation

The most frequently cited factor that teachers reported as facilitating their implementation of knowledge/skills learned through TAMUS/ISLA professional development and other services was the support they received from school administrators and staff. Campus administrators and staff were described as “very sensitive to the needs of the ESL learners” and “very supportive of LEP students.” District staff also were perceived as facilitating implementation through providing resources and access to professional development. Other factors noted were the availability of technology resources (e.g., software), collaborative planning time, and campus ESL specialists.

Factors Hindering Implementation

A relatively small number of survey respondents mentioned factors hindering implementation (27% - institute participants; 18% - online course participants). Those factors included lack of planning time, lack of support, untrained faculty, and insufficient instructional resources. Site visit interviewees stated that the only challenges they encountered were veteran teacher resistance to new methods, the reluctance of some principals to allow teachers to attend trainings, and an inability to provide services to all teachers interested in ESL instruction.

Teacher and Student Outcomes From Participation in LEP SSI Project

According to survey responses and site visit interviews, teacher perceptions of outcomes from participating in the LEP SSI project included:

- more teachers taking and passing the ESL/bilingual certification exam;
- increased opportunities for professional development in ESL instruction;
- increased access to needed instructional resources and materials;
- an increased understanding of the processes for and influences on second language learning; and
- improved instructional practices.

Student outcomes as reported by teachers included:

- increased confidence on class tasks;
- increased levels of comfort in expressing themselves and asking for help; and
- performance increases on the Reading Proficiency Tests in English (RPTE) and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

Relationship Between Support Services and Passing Rates on the ESL/Bilingual Certification Exams

Regarding the relationship between LEP SSI support services and passing rates on the ESL/bilingual certification exams, findings indicated:

- 82% of the 2005–2007 ISLA institute participants were from LEP SSI grantee districts. Of those, 65% passed their ESL/bilingual certification exams during that time period;
- Only 29% of the 2006–2007 online course participants were LEP SSI grantee teachers; however, of those, 81% of them passed their ESL/bilingual certification exams; and

- The state passing rate on the ESL/bilingual certification exams between 2005 and 2007 was 85.9%. The overall passing rate of LEP SSI grantee teachers during that period was 69%.

CONCLUSIONS

This report summarizes SEDL's evaluation of TAMUS support activities to LEP SSI grant recipients. The goals of the LEP SSI project were focused on reducing the number of teachers teaching under a bilingual exception waiver by increasing the number of teachers trained in ESL instruction, thereby improving LEP students' performance outcomes.

The first year of TAMUS' award from TEA (June 2004) was considered more of a planning year to establish the ISLA and outreach center offices, design a needs assessment process, develop workshops and seminars to further teachers' knowledge and skills in ESL instruction, and develop and gather useful ESL information and instructional resources. In the following two years, ISLA staff provided a full range of support and services to LEP SSI grant recipients. For example, teachers from Cycle 1, Cycle 2, and Cycle 3 LEP SSI grantee districts attended more than 30 different types of professional development sessions offered between January 2006 and June 2007. An expert review of two of the ISLA sessions indicated that their content was grounded in current research on ESL/bilingual instruction, based on sound educational and language learning theory, and aligned with national standards for ESL teaching and learning as well as with SBEC/TEExES standards for ESL certification.

The result of professional development opportunities, as well as of other support services provided by ISLA, was that grantee district teachers felt better prepared for LEP instruction through a greater understanding of the processes underlying second language learning. They also perceived that their students appeared more confident about their class tasks, were not afraid to ask for help, and felt increasingly more comfortable expressing themselves. Teachers and administrators also indicated they were seeing improvements in their LEP students' performance on both the TAKS and RPTE tests. Survey results may be beneficial for future program development; however, it must be remembered that there were only 30 to 40 participants at each of the three ISLA institutes. Of those, slightly over 50% submitted surveys. The low number of participants might be the result of these institute trainings being held during the summers when a number of teachers may have other plans and/or responsibilities. In addition, teachers may have participated in an ESL/ bilingual training offered by ISLA other than the certification preparation course.

Finally, SBEC certification data on pass rates indicated that of teachers participating in the TAMUS/ISLA certification preparation trainings, a substantial number are subsequently passing their ESL/bilingual certification exams. However, this percentage is still lower than the overall state pass rate. Nevertheless, a continued examination of pass rates for LEP SSI grantee teachers may show increases over the next several years. The data suggests that a number of teachers who participated in the trainings did not immediately take their certification exams at the conclusion of the trainings. This focus

may also reveal the extent that the LEP SSI project may be reducing the number of teachers teaching under ESL and bilingual exemptions and waivers.

In summary, the evaluation of the LEP SSI project indicates that grant recipients welcomed the support and services provided by TAMUS/ISLA. In addition, through such support and services, TEA is moving well toward attaining its goals of reducing the number of teachers teaching under bilingual exception waivers by increasing the number of teachers trained in ESL instruction and prepared to take the certification exams. Self-reported findings suggest that the project is also beginning to positively impact LEP student outcomes.

The complete report can be found at:

http://www.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/LimitedEnglish/lep_0807.pdf