



Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program: Cycle 1 Evaluation Report - Executive Summary

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Arroyo Research Services

CREDITS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents initial evaluation findings for Cycle 1 of the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program (TDRPP), focusing on implementation and outcomes achieved from August 2008 through May 2009. TDRPP was established based on a recommendation of the High School Completion and Success Initiative Council and was funded by the Texas State Legislature. Competitive grant awards were made to 22 education organizations throughout the state that include local school districts, open enrollment charter schools, institutions of higher education (IHEs), county departments of education, and nonprofit education organizations. The Cycle 1 start date was August 28, 2008. The end date was initially August 31, 2009, but was extended to December 31, 2009.

Among Texas Education Agency (TEA) initiatives, TDRPP is unique in its focus, goals, and funding structure. It focuses directly on dropout recovery, rather than dropout prevention. Within multiple program models that allow maximum flexibility to meet individual student needs, TDRPP allows grantees to assist students under the age of 25 who have dropped out of school by either earning a high school diploma or demonstrating college readiness. College readiness is defined as earning a General Education Development (GED) certificate, meeting minimum passing standards on a Texas Success Initiative (TSI) approved instrument, and earning college credit in a core course or through advanced technical credit. TDRPP uses a pay for performance model that directly ties payments to demonstrated student academic progress and program completion. Grantees may use earned performance funds to bolster services, extend the program past the end date, or to offer student incentives.

The TDRPP funding model has three components: base funding, performance funding, and “other payments.” All grantees received a base funding amount of up to \$150,000 for purposes of planning, establishing infrastructure, and implementing the program. In addition to the base funding, grantees can earn performance funds based on student achievement of specified academic performance benchmarks and student completion of the program. Grantees may earn \$250 (up to a maximum of \$1,000) for each student who achieves one or more of the specified academic benchmarks. An award of \$1,000 is made for each student who successfully completes the program. As a result, the 22 TDRPP Cycle 1 grantees received a total of \$3,212,173 base funding and were authorized up to a total of \$2,726,000 for performance funding. Finally, in order to provide a consistent level of funding per student across all grantees, grantees not eligible for Foundation School Program (FSP) payments based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) of eligible students can earn up to \$4,000 in “other payments” for each TDRPP student who demonstrates academic progress. Local education agencies (LEAs) and open enrollment charter schools receive FSP payments based on ADA. IHEs and nonprofit education organizations do not receive FSP payments based on ADA and therefore, are eligible to receive TDRPP “other payments.”

EVALUATION

TEA contracted with Arroyo Research Services (ARS) in December 2008 to conduct an evaluation of TDRPP program effectiveness. The evaluation focused on four key objectives specified by TEA:

- 01 | Describe and evaluate the implementation of program strategies
- 02 | Evaluate the impact of the program on student outcomes
- 03 | Evaluate the impact of the program on teacher /staff effectiveness
- 04 | Determine the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the program

Focusing on implementation and outcomes achieved from August 2008 through May 2009, TDRPP is demonstrating measurable student outcomes and accomplishments within its first year. Grantees are recruiting students within the target population, aggressively implementing educational and support programs, and moving students toward graduation. Main findings for each of the evaluation objectives are listed below.

KEY FINDINGS

01 | Implementation of program strategies:

- Grantees included 14 local school districts and 1 county department of education which provided services through a local school district (in essence, 15 local school districts), 3 nonprofit education organizations, 2 IHEs, and 2 open enrollment charter schools. Local school districts and open enrollment charter schools primarily focus on assisting students to complete high school, while IHEs and nonprofit education organizations focus on helping students achieve college readiness.
- As of May 15, 2009 (the data collection cut-off date for this report), TDRPP grantees had served 1,173 students who had previously dropped out of school. The average number of students per site was 53, with enrollments ranging from 14 to 123 participants.
- Grantees focused on students with diverse academic needs, ranging from students who needed only to pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in order to graduate to students who need several years of course credits to graduate. Grantees also had the option of pursuing college readiness. This means that while some program completions occurred during the initial grant period, more can be anticipated in subsequent years of the program.
- Grantees recruited students with substantially different academic backgrounds. Among TDRPP enrollees with local school district grantees, 65% last attended 12th grade prior to enrollment, where only 25% of IHE and 21% of open enrollment charter school TDRPP participants last attended 12th grade. IHEs and nonprofit educational organizations had the highest percentage of students whose last grade level of record was 9th or 10th grade. Students attending IHEs were far more likely to have been out of school longer than students enrolled in other grantee types, with only 36% of students last attending school in 2006-2008 compared to 88% of local school district participants and 92% of open

enrollment charter school participants. Seventy-four percent of students in nonprofit educational organizations last attended school between 2006 and 2008.

- Grantees were located in a broad range of communities that had high numbers of dropouts in 2006, as targeted in the TDRPP Request for Applications (RFA). High school completion rates for grantee communities ranged from 59 to 90%, while college degree completion rates ranged from 11 to 38%. Unemployment rates, income, and percentage of families below the poverty line also varied widely, reflecting the diversity of Texas communities facing challenges in working with out-of-school youth.
- TDRPP grantees employed a wide variety of approaches to dropout recovery in nearly every respect, including approaches to recruitment, support, educational options, use of incentives, hours of operation, use of virtual educational programs, use of group versus individual delivery mechanisms, and degree of integration with local school districts.
- On average, grantee sites experienced delays of 2.3 months and yet enrolled more students than projected.

02 Student Impact:

- Sixteen percent ($n=183$) of the 1,173 students who enrolled in a TDRPP completed the program. Of these, 182 graduated from high school, and 1 demonstrated college readiness. Completion rates across the 22 grantees ranged from 0 to 36%. Overall, 86% of students persisted in their TDRPP program, with grantees targeting college readiness achieving a 92% persistence rate¹ and grantees targeting high school graduation achieving an 85% persistence rate (see Table 1 Student Outcomes by Grantee Goal).
- Participants, including those who completed the program, met 493 interim benchmarks as of May 2009, with 375 TDRPP students (32%) achieving at least one benchmark.
- For the 232 students enrolled in programs focused on college readiness, the most common interim benchmark earned was college credit in the core curriculum, with 57 benchmarks met. Additional college readiness interim benchmarks included 24 students who met or exceeded TSI standards and 10 students who earned a GED (see Table 2 Percentage of Students Meeting College Readiness Interim Benchmarks).
- For the 941 students enrolled in programs focused on high school graduation, the most common benchmark earned was grade advancement; 269 grades were advanced by 263 students with four

¹ Student persistence is defined as the percentage of students who did not drop out of the program; they either remained in or completed the program.

students advancing two or more grades. In addition, passing TAKS was achieved by 74 of the 941 participants (see Table 3 Percentage of Students Meeting H.S. Diploma Interim Benchmarks).

- No statistically significant relationships between student demographic characteristics and program outcomes have been identified to date.
- The odds of students in open enrollment charter schools completing high school were statistically greater than those in local school districts after other student and program factors were controlled.
- In the nonprofit education organizations, 33% of students met the benchmark for earning college credit in the core curriculum. While no students in IHEs met this benchmark, 12% of students in IHEs met or exceeded TSI standards, 12% earned GEDs, and 19% enrolled in a Texas IHE.
- In nonprofit education organizations, 15% of students achieved an interim benchmark that was proposed by the grantee. While the TDRPP application allowed all grantees to propose interim benchmarks, no other grantee types reported custom benchmarks.
- Students who were proficient on their last TAKS had a higher probability of completing high school than those who did not score at or above the proficiency threshold. Students who were proficient on their last TAKS math exam were almost twice as likely to complete high school within the reporting period as non-proficient students. Similar differences were found for the TAKS reading exam. These differences were statistically significant after controlling for other student and program characteristics.
- Students in programs offering distance learning were more likely to complete the program.
- The top four grantees seeking high school graduation outcomes accounted for 48% of the interim benchmarks and 52% of the program completions achieved. These grantees were more likely to serve students who left high school at a later point in their career, many of whom were primarily in need of completing the TAKS assessment.

Table 1 Student Outcomes by Grantee Goal

	Grantee Goal		Overall
	H.S. Diploma	College Readiness	
Program Completion	18.6%	0.4%	15.6%
Student Persistence	84.5%	92.2%	86.0%

Source: Figures reported are from the sample of 1,173 students; 941 students in programs aiming to achieve high school graduation, and 232 students in programs aiming to achieve college readiness. Data from performance payment reports submitted to TDRPP program management by grantees in May and June of 2009, Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), and Arroyo Research Services (ARS) coding of grantee types.

Table 2 Percentage of Students Meeting College Readiness Interim Benchmarks

Interim Benchmark	Students Reaching Benchmark
Earned College Credit in Core Curriculum	24.6%
Enrolled in Texas Institution of Higher Education	10.3%
Met other Interim Benchmarks Proposed by Applicant	10.3%
Met or Exceeded TSI Standards	7.3%
Earned GED	4.3%
Advanced Performance Category on Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)	0.0%

Source: Figures reported are from the sample of 232 students in programs aiming to achieve college readiness. Data from performance payment reports submitted to TDRPP program management by grantees in May and June of 2009, Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), and Arroyo Research Services (ARS) coding of grantee types.

Table 3 Percentage of Students Meeting H.S. Diploma Interim Benchmarks

Interim Benchmark	Students Reaching Benchmark
Grade Advancement	28.0%
Passing Score on TAKS	7.9%

Source: Figures reported are from the sample of 941 students in programs aiming to achieve high school graduation. Data from performance payment reports submitted to TDRPP program management by grantees in May and June of 2009, Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), and Arroyo Research Services (ARS) coding of grantee types. Note: denominator is number of students in programs aiming to achieve high school graduation.

03 | Teacher/Staff Impact:

- Of the 137 TDRPP teachers who responded to staff surveys, all met the minimum teaching requirements of a bachelor's degree and 76.3% of teacher respondents at local school districts had also earned their master's degree.
- Approximately 53% of TDRPP teacher respondents have less than a year of experience working directly with dropout recovery students, with some variation across grantee types and program strategy.
- TDRPP teachers report generally high levels of self-efficacy and collective self-efficacy, important determinants of student success. Teacher self-efficacy is defined as a teacher's belief in his/her capability to influence student achievement and motivation. On a 9-point scale, teacher respondents overall average score was 6.94.
- The lowest ranking for self-efficacy was related to teachers' belief in their ability to assist families in helping students to do well in the program. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (62%) indicate that parents' lack of involvement is a problem for students in the program.

04 | Cost effectiveness and sustainability:

- By design, direct TDRPP funds cover varying percentages of the overall effort associated with educating and supporting TDRPP program participants. Beyond TDRPP grant funds, each grantee was supported by multiple funding sources, including the school district, local government, foundations, and community-based agencies.
- The average TDRPP funding per participant was \$2,929². Final cost and cost/benefit calculations are anticipated to fluctuate until final performance figures are available at the close of Cycle 1 program activity.
- Grantee realization of performance funds ranged from 0 to 62.5%, with grantees earning an average of 11% of available performance funds as of May 2009.
- Through May 2009, nonprofit education organizations showed the highest earned percentage of available performance funds, at an average 16%. IHEs earned the lowest average of 5% of available performance funds.

² Calculated using base funding plus earned performance payments. Details are included in chapter 7.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings and the detailed discussion and data within the report, the evaluation team recommends the following, by objective:

01 | Implementation of program strategies

Grantee/Program Recommendations

- Encourage/require grantees to conduct needs assessments of targeted students. Many grantees experienced unanticipated student needs that were discovered once students were recruited into the program and went through an initial student needs assessment. Prospective grantees should conduct a needs assessment of their anticipated population during the application and program development process to better inform their program design.
- Broaden the definition of parent involvement. Grantees report that parents are often not directly involved in the lives of TDRPP students, but that broader family participation is important. Expand parent involvement to include broader family participation, as well as providing resources and examples to grantees regarding family involvement during the application and program implementation processes.
- Support pre-planning and cross-site visitation. Sites that reported visiting other dropout recovery programs during their program development found this to be a valuable process. It is therefore recommended that prospective and early implementers be strongly encouraged to visit other programs, confer with other program directors via telephone, and to collaborate across districts on program development.
- Provide stronger guidance on initial staffing strategies. Grantees were better able to identify and recruit students than staff in several cases, due in part to the time limited and performance-based funding structure of the grant. New grantees would likely benefit from examples of how programs successfully identified, hired or transferred, and funded staff and teachers early in the program implementation process.
- Encourage early planning for summer programming. Many grantees did not have initial plans to operate in summer 2009 but discovered that a) their slower than expected startup both required and enabled them to continue operations, and b) that their student population needed continuous services and opportunities in order to succeed. Therefore, strong support for planning summer programs early in the grant cycle, and for identifying how student needs will be met throughout the year in the application process, is recommended.

- Provide structured consultation to grantees regarding program planning and implementation immediately after notification of the award. A group planning meeting or individual grantee phone consultation with TEA staff could assist grantees in their planning for timely program startup and strong program execution
- More detailed specification of indirect funding in the initial application, as well as subsequent reporting of the use of indirect or in-kind funds during implementation is recommended.
- Continue support for Optional Flexible School Day Program. Students and staff report that the program enabled students to work around barriers they experienced in the traditional high school program and to support more rapid credit accumulation strategies.
- Expand grantee guidance regarding student incentive payments. Although the program is designed to encourage experimentation, including differential use of student incentive payments, expanded guidance about how student incentives can be used, as well as examples of how they are being implemented, managed, and explained to teachers, students, parents and community members would likely be useful to grantees.

Evaluation Recommendations:

- Prepare case studies of successful grantees. While this interim report includes data about initial grantee experiences, we plan to include case studies of successful grantees in the final report in order to assist TEA and other grantees in understanding the elements of successful dropout recovery programs in Texas.

02 | Student Impact

Grantee/Program Recommendations

- Continue support for the broad mix of programs and eligible grantees. Each grantee type served different students with different strategies and made a unique contribution to the program. Until further data are available to inform decisions about targeted students or specific outcomes, continuing support for each grantee type is recommended.
- Review unearned benchmarks. Several benchmarks were not achieved by any participants within the reporting period. Some may have been accomplished subsequently. Unearned benchmarks should be reviewed and possibly removed in subsequent applications.
- Review underperforming grantees mid-way through the grant cycle. The flip side of the finding that half of the grantees are responsible for nearly 80% of program outcomes is that the other half is underperforming. While this may be due in part to differences in the students recruited into the program, it is also due to program design and support issues. TEA should identify and work directly with grantees that are underperforming in order to ensure strong program implementation.

- Improve reporting of program completion and grade advancement. Grantees did not uniformly report program completion or grade advancement during the reporting period. The evaluation team compiled program completions from both the student data upload reports and the Performance Payment Reports and reconciled information from the two. All program completions and grade advancements should be reported under the appropriate code on the Performance Payment Reports, and sites should receive further guidance in how to calculate and report attainment of each Completion and Interim Benchmark.

Evaluation Recommendations

- Expand the review of student incentives. Student incentive information used in the interim report is based on an indicator of whether or not student incentives were used. The evaluation will expand its review of student incentives to include information about how the incentives were used, distributed, and communicated in order to inform best practices for subsequent programs.
- Clarify and, if necessary, expand reporting of staff and teachers associated with each program. The initial evaluation design assumed smaller numbers of core teachers with higher TDRPP-specific teaching loads than was in fact the case. To better track survey responses, determine the universe of applicable teachers, and to link teacher information to student and program outcomes, the evaluation team will seek to identify each teacher working with TDRPP students at each site. We therefore recommend including teacher data with the student data upload in each semester.
- Gather and include individual service utilization data. Grantees provided service availability information, but determining the effects of various services would be done best by obtaining individual service utilization information. Service utilization items will therefore be added to the student follow-up surveys.
- Provide survey incentives. While survey response rates were within normal range, the evaluation would be well served by an increased rate of return that enabled direct comparison and use of student and teacher survey data on a per-program basis. We will therefore use student survey incentives to increase the response rate, and increase direct communication with teachers regarding survey completion.
- Expand student matching. Data were missing sufficient identifiers to locate 56 student participants in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). This could be due to multiple factors, including name changes, but is most likely due to missing or incorrect student id numbers. Additional attention on the part of grantees and the TDRPP program is warranted to assure that all relevant data can be linked for the purposes of evaluating the program.
- Consider funding identification and analysis of non-TDRPP dropout recovery programs in Texas, or creation of a control group of Texas dropouts. A control group study using PEIMS data could create a statistically matched group of students who dropped out in similar years with similar characteristics, and review whether and where they returned to a Texas public school, whether they subsequently

completed a high school diploma, and the differences in the time to completion and other outcomes compared to TDRPP participants.

03 | Teacher/Staff Impact

Grantee/Program Recommendations

- Assure that professional development is focused on strategies for supporting dropout recovery students. Professional development can and should be about the general needs of at-risk students, but should also focus on the particular strategies around which each program is designed.
- Encourage grantees to commence professional development early in the life of the program. Respondents from several programs were unable to identify specific TDRPP professional development at the time teacher surveys were administered, which was approximately six months into the program. To assure maximum effect, professional development should be an early and integral part of the program.
- Broaden the definition of professional development. Professional development as a workshop or series of workshops has a place, but research has repeatedly demonstrated that teacher peer coaching, mentoring, participation in professional learning communities that include review of student work and approaches to solving specific student needs, produce stronger student learning outcomes.

Evaluation Recommendations:

- Expand the analysis of the role professional development and staff support in building teacher self and collective efficacy.
- Connect student and teacher survey responses on a per-site basis and include in the outcome model. Doing so is dependent on success with the prior recommendation related to increased survey response rates.

04 | Cost effectiveness and sustainability

Grantee/Program Recommendations

- Improve accounting for non-TDRPP resources. Grantees obtained widely varying amounts of indirect and in-kind support from their organizations, and this information is an important component of the cost-benefit analysis. Recommendations related to guidance and reporting of non-TDRPP resources are included above.
- Provide grantees with best practices in start-up and staffing in order to support the goals of scalability.

Evaluation Recommendations:

- Obtain per-student data on FSP payments generated by TDRPP participants. This would enable more complete consideration of the comparability of funding across grantees and calculation of the true cost to the state on a per-student basis.
- Expand grantee financial reporting. Information available through the current financial reporting is not sufficiently detailed to enable comparison across grantees, to determine the level of effort associated with program strategies, or to make valid comparisons to non-TDRPP dropout recovery programs. We therefore plan to include a request for financial information from grantees that supplements current reporting requirements.
- Expand analysis of comparable, non-TDRPP dropout recovery programs. As indicated within chapter 7, there is a relative dearth of comparable, large-scale dropout recovery programs, and a full and fair comparison of costs and benefits requires that the evaluation team obtain additional data regarding the funding and operations of the programs used for comparison to TDRPP.

SUMMARY

Initial results suggest that Cycle 1 grantees are implementing the program with fidelity and vigor, have achieved important early outcomes, and will continue to achieve outcomes from Cycle 1 funding until the end of the grant period. Given the implementation delays and the early cut-off date for data collection, program outcomes documented in this report are based on six to eight months of actual program operation. Outcomes for the period between May and December 2009 are expected to exceed those reported herein.

The probability of achieving these continued and accelerating outcomes, and the usefulness of additional data for determining cost effectiveness and optimal program strategies, suggest the advisability of continuing the program for an additional year. Results reported above and within the body of the report are preliminary and reflect partial year implementation. As grantees continue providing services through the remainder of the funding period, further demonstration of student academic progress, improvements in the cost-effectiveness, and more complete evaluation data and findings are expected.

Evaluation findings presented in this report should be interpreted with caution. Because student outcomes associated with Cycle 1 participation are likely to be achieved between the data collection cutoff date for this report and the project end date of December 31, 2009 and beyond, it is too early to determine the full extent of Cycle 1 outcomes. Additionally, grantees achieved full capacity and implementation mid-year and are likely to achieve sustainable levels of implementation and outcomes in future years. Full consideration of Cycle 1 outcomes, using comprehensive data, will be included in the Final Evaluation Report anticipated in September 2010. The Final Evaluation Report will also be bolstered by additional data from the 21 Cycle 2 grantees.