

**EVALUATION OF THE TEXAS GRANTS TO REDUCE
ACADEMIC DROPOUTS PROGRAM:
INTERIM REPORT**

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES THROUGH SUMMER 2004

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Over the past decade, Texas has instituted a number of programs and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of high school programs and increasing the graduation rate and success of high school students. Despite overall gains in graduation rates and student achievement resulting from these programs, certain student groups in Texas high schools continue to fare better than others.

As a first step toward ensuring the success of all students, the 77th Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 702, which required the development of a measurable state plan to reduce the dropout rate. In 2001, a dropout prevention initiative was instituted. Two years later, the 78th Texas Legislature, building on the earlier dropout prevention initiative, appropriated \$60 million for high school completion and success initiatives through Rider 67 of Section III of the General Appropriations Act. Funding under this rider facilitates the Texas High School Project, a public-private partnership, which includes the State of Texas, the Office of the Governor, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the Communities Foundation of Texas. The goal of the Texas High School Project is to boost graduation rates and increase the number of high school students prepared for the full range of postsecondary opportunities.

The Texas Grants to Reduce Academic Dropouts program, referred to herein as the Texas dropout prevention grant (TXDPG), a \$5 million dropout intervention program, is one component of the Texas High School Project. It provides funding for programs in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools that will result in increased numbers of students attaining a comprehensive base of knowledge and skills and earning a high school diploma. The Evaluation Group (TEG) at Texas A&M University is conducting the evaluation of this grant program for the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The overall purpose of the evaluation is to assess the impact of the activities and strategies implemented through the TXDPG program on student achievement. The purpose of this interim report is to provide context for the evaluation

by describing the characteristics of the campuses that received the grant and the types of activities the campuses are implementing over the first term of the grant period.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation of the TXDPG grant program will progress in four overlapping stages, which include context, comparative, observational, and student-level data analyses. Because of the timing of this interim report in relation to TXDPG project implementation, the results presented herein focus on the first stage of the descriptive study: the context analysis. The report describes the TXDPG program, the research design for the entire evaluation project, the characteristics of the campuses that received TXDPG funds, and the activities implemented by these campuses during the first term of the grant period (i.e., Summer 2004).

During this first stage of the TXDPG evaluation, TEG relied heavily upon two sources of information: grantee progress reports and TEA databases (Academic Excellence Indicator System-AEIS, Public Education Information Management System-PEIMS, and results from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills-TAKS data). The first progress report, which included data from Summer 2004, provided evidence on the progress of the initial implementation phase of the TXDPG project. The AEIS, PEIMS, and TAKS data provided detailed information on student characteristics (including both demographics and academic performance), supplying a context for the project's implementation. Descriptive statistics were computed in order to determine the baseline characteristics of participating campuses, student achievement levels, strategies/activities implemented, and students served. These detailed statistics are described below.

Characteristics of Campuses Receiving TXDPG Grant Funding

TXDPG funds were awarded at the end of Spring 2004 to 13 organizations, including open enrollment charter schools, that serve 61 campuses. The schools are most heavily concentrated within metropolitan areas (i.e., major urban or suburban) surrounding Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi. The majority of campuses enroll between 1501–2000 students, although approximately one-quarter enroll 500 or fewer students. The average enrollment at the

end of the 2002–03 school year was approximately 1,328. The majority of campuses offer Regular Instruction to students in grades 9 through 12.

Students enrolled in participating campuses during 2003-04 were predominantly Hispanic (56%). This is 17% higher than Hispanic enrollment across Texas high schools at large. The number of African American students at TXDPG schools (22%) also exceeded the respective state percent (14%). The percentage of White students at grantee campuses (19%) was less than half that of all Texas high schools (44%).

Over one-tenth (14%) of the students enrolled in participating campuses were classified as limited English proficient (LEP), twice that of LEP students in grades 9-12 statewide (7%). Across grantee campuses, there were approximately equal percentages of Special Education students and those participating in Gifted/Talented programs. The numbers of students at TXDPG campuses in both types of programs mirror those of all Texas high schools.

Five percent of the students at grantee campuses received disciplinary placement under Chapter 37 of the *Texas Education Code*. This is comparable to the disciplinary placement rate for all Texas high school students. Approximately four out of every ten (41%) grade 9-12 students throughout the state were classified as economically disadvantaged, compared to over half (56%) of the students at TXDPG campuses.

Students at campuses receiving TXDPG funds generally had lower passing rates on the statewide assessment test battery, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), than the state as a whole. Achievement gaps were most consistent across the ninth grade subgroups examined. Just over three quarters (76%) of the ninth graders at TXDPG campuses met the state standard on the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the 2004 TAKS test, compared to 84% of ninth grade students statewide. Similarly, 46% of ninth grade students attending TXDPG campuses passed the mathematics portion of the TAKS test; while 59% of all ninth grade students in Texas met the passing standard for the math portion of the TAKS.

Although the discrepancies in performance narrowed in tenth grade, consistent gaps remained when all TXDPG students were compared to all high school students. The most pronounced difference in student performance was on the science test (TXDPG, 54% vs. Statewide, 64%). The performance gap between TXDPG students and students across the state narrows further for students in the eleventh grade. Higher proportions of both TXDPG students (84%) and all Texas eleventh graders (87%) met the state standard on the ELA portion of the 2004 TAKS test. Approximately eight out of ten students (81%) at TXDPG campuses passed the mathematics portion of the TAKS test compared to 85% statewide.

For all grades, the performance gap between TXDPG students and the statewide passing rates widens when *all tests passed* is used as the benchmark. Less than half of ninth grade students attending TXDPG campuses (45%) passed all TAKS tests in 2004, compared to 57% statewide. Tenth grade passing rates for all tests dropped even further: 39% of the tenth grade students at TXDPG campuses passed all TAKS tests taken versus 49% of the tenth graders statewide. Eleventh grade students fared the best of the three grades analyzed. Just under two thirds of the eleventh graders passed all tests taken (66%), compared to 72% of all eleventh grade students in Texas.

Project Progress Report: Summer 2004

A progress report was designed to record information from the grantees regarding the number of students served, the types of strategies implemented, and the number of staff that were involved in providing services. Data collected through the first Project Progress Report (PPR1), which includes activities completed during Summer 2004, are reported in this section. Results are based on 62 campuses (97%) that submitted a PPR for Summer 2004.¹ It is strongly recommended that these results be interpreted in terms of Summer 2004 only and not the grant program in its entirety. Program results for Fall 2004 and Spring 2005 semesters should reveal the full extent to which grant projects are serving students and implementing strategies and activities.

¹ Thirteen organizations serving 61 campuses received Texas dropout prevention grants. Three campuses were simultaneously served by two separate grant organizations. Since a PPR was submitted by each organization based on the specific strategies and activities funded on each campus, these three campuses were treated separately, bringing the total number of campuses to 64.

Students Served by the TXDPG Program

Approximately 26,370 students are projected to be served during the grant period (2/1/04 to 8/31/05). The *projected* number refers to the total students grantees *anticipate* serving during the grant period. According to 2003-04 PEIMS data, total student enrollment for the 62 campuses that responded to the PPR1 is roughly 79,450. Of those, approximately 46,900 (59%) students are at-risk of dropping out of school. The projected number of students corresponds to 33% of total student enrollment and 56% of enrollment for at-risk students.

Of the 25,181 high school students projected to receive services over the grant period, approximately seven percent received services during Summer 2004. Campuses reported that 1,189 students are projected to be served in grades five through eight during the grant period. However, no elementary or middle school students received services during Summer 2004.

On average, grantees intend on serving about one third of the total students enrolled or half of the at-risk student enrollment. Students in grades five through eight comprise a small portion of the total number of students projected to receive services during the grant period. Only high school students received services during Summer 2004, and of the number projected for the grant period, less than 10% received services.

Strategies and Activities Implemented During Summer 2004

The TXDPG program focuses on activities directed toward students exhibiting characteristics that are identified as indicators of a greater propensity for dropping out of school prior to graduation from high school. To meet the goals and objectives of the grant program, grant recipients selected strategies and activities from a list of allowable uses of grant funds. Funds were directed towards activities and strategies that best serve the needs of at-risk students on their campuses.

The activity supported by the greatest number of campuses during Summer 2004 was professional development for teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners (47%). Other frequently implemented activities were extended learning opportunities (36%) and credit

recovery programs (31%). Strategies and activities supported by the fewest number of campuses were parent or community volunteer programs (0%), dual high school/college course credit opportunities (2%), and service learning opportunities for students (2%).

The majority of strategies and activities supported by grant funds during Summer 2004 supplemented programs already in place. Exceptions to this trend include new programs such as online diagnostic assessment for students, hiring of additional counselors, and professional development for counselors. On average, support appears to be supplemental rather than directed towards new programs.

Students Participating in Strategies and Activities. Detailed information on students served by grant-funded activities will be addressed in a Fall 2004 Student Information Report (see Appendix A) that will be available in Summer 2005. Items in the summer progress report were developed to provide preliminary information on the number of students who participated in a select group of activities.

Of the students served during Summer 2004, the greatest number participated in credit recovery programs (69%) followed by participation in programs that were expansions of the Ninth Grade Success Initiative (35%). The fewest number of students participated in service learning opportunities (0%), work study programs (<1.0%) and services for pregnant/parenting students (<1.0%). With the exception of these strategies and activities, the percentage of students participating in all other activities ranged between 3% and 27%.

In general, the majority of campuses used funds to support professional development for teachers and credit recovery programs for students. Grantees tended to focus on activities that assisted students with the accrual of needed credits.

Personnel Involved in the TXDPG Program During Summer 2004

A total of 319 staff members participated in the grant program during Summer 2004. The majority of staff involved in the TXDPG program during the summer were highly qualified teachers (70%). Together, paraprofessionals or instructional assistants, administrators, and

counselors accounted for the remaining 30%. Whereas the majority of highly qualified teachers (93%) and counselors (86%) who provided services during the summer were funded by the grant, just under half of the paraprofessionals (42%) and administrators (49%) were grant funded. In addition to staff, 185 parents were involved in the grant program during Summer 2004.

A total of 663 individuals received training in the needs of diverse learners by the end of Summer 2004. The vast majority of those trained were highly qualified teachers (98%). More teachers received training in the needs of diverse learners than provided services during Summer 2004. This finding suggests that teachers received professional development in preparation for the Fall 2004 term.

Grantees were also allowed to use funds to reduce the student-to-counselor ratio in their district. Based on the number of counselors involved in the grant program over the Summer 2004 term (22) and the total number of students served by grant funds over summer (1,730), the student-to-counselor ratio for Summer 2004 was 79:1.

Both peer and adult mentors participated in the grant program during the summer term. Campuses reported that each peer mentor was assigned to a single student but multiple students were assigned to each adult mentor. On average, few students participated in a mentoring program during the summer term.

Conclusion

The data support the fact that TXDPG programs are targeting a population of students in need of accelerated academic services. This is evidenced by the socio-economic/demographic status (e.g., economically disadvantaged and/or LEP status) and academic performance (e.g., 2004 TAKS results) comparisons to statewide benchmarks. Based on the comparative analysis of TXDPG campuses and all Texas high schools, it appears that TXDPG grants were awarded to campuses in clear need of assistance. Additionally, campuses are beginning to implement allowable and required activities under the grant program.