Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

Annual Implementation Report

Evaluation of Year 6

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Executive Summary

The Texas Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): Beyond Grad program (referred to as "GEAR UP" in this report) was in its sixth year of program implementation during the 2023–24 school year. The program continued to make important strides to increase early college awareness, readiness, and success for low-income and historically underrepresented students in Texas. Despite its successes in Year 6, the program faced ongoing challenges related to staffing school personnel and student engagement as well as new challenges that arose due to delays with Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Program Overview

The aim of GEAR UP is to provide targeted services to a grade-specific primary cohort of students who were in Grade 7 during the 2018–19 school year (i.e., the class of 2024) to high school graduation and through their first year of postsecondary education (i.e., through the 2024–25 academic year). GEAR UP also provides basic services to a priority cohort of students consisting of all other students in Grades 9–12 attending participating high schools in the grantee districts during each year of the 7-year grant (i.e., from school years 2018–19 to 2024–25). The following are core strategies integrated into GEAR UP programming to close the college achievement gap: 1) increasing academic rigor, 2) preparing middle school students, 3) expanding college and career advising and resources for high school students, 4) leveraging technology to expand advising capacity, and 5) developing local alliances (a full description of GEAR UP strategies, goals, and objectives is listed in Appendix A).

To reach these goals, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is working with six participating districts to provide a range of programs and services aligned with these core strategies to class of 2024 and priority cohort students. These strategies include comprehensive individualized college and career counseling, college visits, and opportunities to participate in an academic enrichment or college exploration summer program. Additionally, as part of GEAR UP programming, parents of class of 2024 and priority cohort students also have access to individualized college and career counseling and a variety of parent workshops/events.[1] Another integral component of GEAR UP programming is offering teachers and personnel at GEAR UP campuses access to professional development (PD) to improve academic rigor and college and career counseling services.

To successfully implement the programs and services, TEA has partnered with local and national organizations. TEA has partnered with CFES Brilliant Pathways (CFES) and Advise TX to implement college and career counseling/advising services at the high schools. Previously, CFES and Advise TX provided nonprofit advisors to each of the participating districts to support

[1] Throughout this report, references to "parents" include parents and legal guardians.

individual college- and career-related advising for students and parents.[2,3] In Year 6, the partnerships pivoted to focus on providing technical assistance for district-based college and career advisors. TEA has also partnered with College Possible (formerly College Forward) to use its data management system, CoPilot. CoPilot was first used by participating districts in Year 5 to track student data and enhance reporting. Districts continued using CoPilot in Year 6. To provide targeted PD related to various components of the grant, TEA has also partnered with TNTP.[4] Finally, TEA has partnered with Texas OnCourse (TXOC) to develop curricula, including the TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program (TXOC Academy).

Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

This report presents findings from the implementation study during the sixth year—school year 2023–24—when the class of 2024 students were in Grade 12 and the priority cohort students were in Grade 9, Grade 10, and Grade 11. Findings were derived from data collected via online stakeholder surveys, in-person site visits, and virtual interviews (see Appendix B for full methodological details). The report highlights GEAR UP implementation, promising practices, and sustainability planning initiatives occurring during Year 6 (see Appendix B for the list of evaluation questions used to guide the implementation study).

Key Findings

Academic rigor was an important focus in Year 6 within the participating districts. Participants described PD for teachers to enhance rigor in classrooms that was seen as especially critical given the ongoing challenges districts were experiencing with teacher shortages and students' lack of academic readiness. Participants described differing definitions of rigor, instructional strategies to increase rigor, and improvements to rigor that resulted from this heightened focus. The importance of increasing and maintaining rigor was perceived by some districts as a cornerstone to increasing students' college and career readiness and preparing them to succeed in their postsecondary

> *It's not necessarily the amount of work or how difficult a kid may perceive it to be, but rather how we're asking them to think and what type of assignments we're asking them to complete. That's where the level of rigor is going to come in. Are they thinking creatively? Are they thinking collaboratively? Are they thinking outside of the box … and thinking about things in a way that we might need them to problem solve for the future, for the jobs that they have coming up, for the college courses that they're going to be experiencing? – District principal*

[2] Founded initially as College For Every Student, the organization changed its name in 2018 to CFES Brilliant Pathways to better reflect its expanded mission to support students in both college and career.
[3] In Years 1–4, TEA additionally partnered with a third organization, College Advising Corps, to provide college and career counseling/advising services.
[4] Founded originally as The New Teacher Project (TNTP) in 1997, TNTP is an organization that helps educators improve effectiveness in classroom teaching. The organization changed its name to simply TNTP after its mission expanded beyond serving new teachers.

plans, be that pursuing a college degree or entering the workforce. Additional key findings from the evaluation are as follows:

- **PD initiatives.** To support educators and schools in implementing rigorous academic programs that boost student achievement, GEAR UP continued to implement several PD initiatives in Year 6, including activities led by TNTP, teacher coaching/mentoring, vertical teaming, and the TXOC Academy. TNTP provided individualized support to districts with a specific focus on academic rigor and high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). Previous changes to TNTP support and services implemented in Year 5 (e.g., having a liaison dedicated to each district serve as a primary point of contact) continued to be positively received by districts during Year 6. Some participating teachers suggested there was a need for PD to be directed to new teachers in order to maintain high rigor as staffing turnover and teacher shortages persisted in Year 6. Overall, personnel survey respondents had positive perceptions of the PD, coaching/mentoring, and vertical teaming they received or participated in during Year 6. Counselors and other student service personnel generally *Agreed* that the TXOC Academy helped them learn new information for postsecondary education advising and that they felt better prepared to deliver individualized postsecondary education and career advising to parents.
- **Academic initiatives.** Participating districts continued to focus on academic initiatives including offering advanced courses (e.g., Advanced Placement [AP], honors, dual credit, advanced mathematics), the provision of targeted tutoring, and student preparation for college entrance exams. Some districts were moving away from offering AP courses—due to challenges with staffing and student success—in favor of dual credit courses. Student respondents generally found advanced course offerings in their school to be *Slightly* to *Moderately challenging*. While personnel survey respondents perceived that students were *Somewhat prepared* to *Very prepared* for advanced coursework, site visit participants shared that staff turnover posed a primary challenge to offering and supporting students taking advanced courses. In support of student readiness and preparedness for college entrance exams, districts continued to provide test preparation resources and support to class of 2024 and priority cohort students. Despite the rise of test-optional and test-blind postsecondary institutions, participating districts continued to communicate the value of college entrance exams for students' postsecondary plans.
- **College and career advising initiatives.** TEA's Effective Advising Framework (EAF) was designed to support the planning and implementation of school counseling programs that promote promising and proven career and technical education programs (TEA, 2024). Participating statewide initiatives survey respondents reported being *Slightly familiar* with the EAF. Of the respondents who had reported using TEA's EAF previously, respondents reported that they were generally *Satisfied*. Among participating GEAR UP districts, as in past years, college and career exploration initiatives offered in Year 6 included one-on-one advising, college visits, college and career fairs, summer programs, work-based learning opportunities, and parent/family events. Overall, student and parent survey respondents and site visit participants were generally *Satisfied* with each of the activities in which they participated. Initiatives exposed students to different postsecondary options, provided opportunities to learn about and experience the culture of colleges or specific industries, and

allowed students to interact with current college students. Summer programming primarily focused on supporting students' transitions to high school and college and supporting academic initiatives. Similar to previous years, parent/family events focused on financial aid, availability of college and career advising, and programs available to students.

- **Sustainability initiatives.** As districts looked ahead to the last year of the grant, they were at different stages of their planning and priorities for sustaining activities. Sustainability conversations were primarily occurring between coordinators and their respective central offices to discuss what activities had shown the most promise and should be sustained. Four districts had begun planning for sustainability while the remaining districts were in the nascent stages of planning. Some districts were seeking or had secured additional grant funding to help sustain activities. Site visit participants highlighted that their priorities for sustainability included career and college advising, dual credit and AP courses, student events and trips/college tours, PD offered by TNTP, and Algebra I access for Grade 8 students. The two most commonly cited factors affecting a school's ability to sustain activities included cost and staffing.
- **Financial aid initiatives.** The impact of the FAFSA delay was widely felt across the nation, state, and participating GEAR UP districts during Year 6. School personnel described how the delay had made it difficult for students to submit college applications, engage students in discussions about the affordability of college, and provide students with adequate support. Persistent technical issues with the FAFSA created confusion and frustration among parents, students, and staff for some districts. Even with the delays and challenges reported by districts, most of the districts had already started or were about to begin providing services and events focused on FAFSA completion at the time of the site visits.
- **Grant implementation support.** Participants provided reflections on implementation supports provided from Year 6. District staff continued to note that GEAR UP was integrated into their school's existing college and career initiatives, which supported their college-going culture. TNTP supported the establishment of a culture of high expectations through the facilitation of professional learning communities with GEAR UP coordinators and other district staff in academic leadership roles. TEA continued to support improved data tracking with the use of the CoPilot data management system. Participants shared the helpfulness of CoPilot staff, especially with data entry; however, the time involved and duplication of data entry created challenges with districts' use of CoPilot.

GEAR UP evaluation findings stemmed from a robust set of qualitative and quantitative data. That said, there are some limitations regarding the Annual Implementation Report for Year 6 which should be considered in the interpretation of those findings. Survey response rates, particularly for parents, continued to be low. In Year 6, one of the six participating districts did not have any respondents for the student, parent, and personnel survey; as a result, all findings for the district originate from the site visit. Due to the low numbers of respondents on the parent survey as well as small numbers of respondents in particular groups (e.g., counselors participating in TXOC and questions in which all respondents were from a single district), caution must be taken when interpreting these results.

Promising Practices

Promising practices include innovative practices or strategies described anecdotally by grant stakeholders as being successful. The evaluation team identified several promising practices implemented by districts in Year 6 in alignment with GEAR UP core strategies:

- **Include teachers who teach non-tested courses into PD initiatives that aim to increase academic rigor to establish a schoolwide culture of rigor.** In District 4, site visit participants noted they had seen positive improvements in the level of rigor in their non-tested courses. This increase in rigor was attributed to the fact that along with teachers from end of course (EOC)-tested courses, teachers from non-tested courses were included in conversations related to rigor and encouraged to collect and analyze data in manners traditionally only done with EOC-tested subjects. Incorporating staff across departments and courses helped build and reinforce a culture of high expectations and rigorous instruction across the district.
- **Promote opportunities to provide real-time feedback to teachers through walkthroughs and debriefs.** Several districts (Districts 2, 3, 4, and 5) utilized data walkthroughs in collaboration with TNTP staff, district instructional coaches, and/or school administrators to assess the level of rigor in courses throughout the district, identify areas of growth related to rigor, assess the implementation of specific strategies, and provide feedback for teachers on the components of courses that were rigorous and areas for improvement. Participating core content teachers from Districts 2 and 5 expressed the benefits of this feedback in improving the flow of their courses and allowing for collaborative discussions on how to adapt strategies to fit the context and needs for their specific courses or departments.
- **Involve middle school students in high school dual credit events.** District 4 hosted early college program events in which Grade 8 students and parents/families and the district's dual credit and community partners participated. During these events, students learned about the district's dual credit course offerings, asked questions of dual credit and community partners, and celebrated their acceptance into dual credit courses upon entry to the high school. These events helped increase awareness of dual credit courses for middle school students and their families, helped set expectations for success in these advanced courses, and supported the transition from middle school to high school.
- **Track student performance on and completion of college entrance exams to inform one-on-one advising.** Students' completion of college entrance exams as well as their performance on these tests are stored in a data repository in District 2. This repository is a living document that is updated every time a student takes a test. This dataset is then used by advisors in individualized advising sessions to facilitate more targeted conversations about students' college and career plans and whether the student would want to take or retake an entrance exam to meet their postsecondary goals.
- **Utilize easy and quick sign-up options for college visits.** The District 3 College and Career Center utilized quick response, or QR, codes posted throughout the high school to advertise and have students sign up for college visits. Class of 2024 students from the

district described this as an effective method for alerting students to upcoming college visits and allowing them to sign up for those in which they are interested in attending.

- **Invite alumni and current college students to discuss their postsecondary experiences.** In the Year 5 Annual Implementation Report, evaluation findings highlighted the promising practice of inviting alumni to participate in vertical alignment discussions to identify areas of growth for increased college readiness (Lamb et al., 2023). In Year 6, districts continued to utilize alumni and provided opportunities for alumni and current college students to talk about their college and career experiences to enhance student engagement with postsecondary college and career planning (Districts 4 and 5). District 5 held an alumni mixer for their class of 2024 students to allow students to hear directly from alumni about their postsecondary experiences. District 5 also held an event where previous alumni from the high school, who worked at a large local employer, came back to the campus to discuss their career paths after high school.
- **Secure buy-in from leadership to support grant sustainability.** In District 5, district leadership ensured there was leadership buy-in and a plan for sustainability from the beginning of the grant. The superintendent from District 5 had a vision for grant implementation that included securing funding from a foundation to continue supporting advanced courses, dual credit course offerings, and key positions (e.g., advisors and a middle school counselor) after the conclusion of the GEAR UP grant.
- **Design special events and creative ways to promote FAFSA completion.** Districts implemented various activities and events focused on encouraging FAFSA completion such as holding “senior expos” or “FAFSA nights”; offering dedicated time frames for families to come to the school to complete the FAFSA; using thermometer wall displays to illustrate how many students have completed their FAFSA; and, creating spreadsheets for school personnel to track completion of the FAFSA.
- **Conduct joint staff meetings for counseling and advising staff.** Districts 4, 5, and 6 explained how combined meetings were used to foster smooth collaboration between the high school counselors and college and career advisors. The District 4 principal explained that they attended weekly meetings with advisors, counselors, and the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction to ensure all staff were on the same page and to “look for opportunities for additional support or to fortify the support already in place.”

Recommendations

The evaluation team identified the following recommendations for TEA to consider in future grant implementation and implementation of similar programming outside of GEAR UP:

- **Continue to support collaborative discussions with district staff and teachers to enhance academic rigor.** Continued collaboration between TNTP and districts could lead to the development of a shared understanding of academic rigor that acknowledges the unique contextual factors of each district. Incorporating teachers into discussions on academic rigor and strategies to increase rigor can provide an opportunity for teachers to share insights on what they are experiencing in the classroom and help tailor strategies and priorities to districts’ needs. Without a shared understanding, there may

be a lack of clarity about the supports and needs of staff within the district, such as the divide described by participating teachers from two districts who cited a discrepancy between the PD being offered and their PD needs.

- **Providing support and guidance for districts focused on prioritizing and implementing HQIM.** Participants largely identified HQIM as a cornerstone to rigorous instruction. TNTP and participating staff reflected on how they observed positive increases in rigor when HQIM was adopted and marked differences in rigor between districts implementing HQIM and those not. Providing districts with additional resources and guidance on the identification, selection, and implementation of HQIM may help support increased use of HQIM across participating districts.
- **Despite the rise of test-optional and test-blind postsecondary institutions, emphasize the value and benefits of college entrance exams for students and families to increase buy-in.** Despite the rise in test-optional and test-blind institutions, test scores are still often needed to qualify for scholarships. As such, districts continued to encourage students to complete entrance exams due to the potential benefit for students such as being able to participate in dual credit courses and scholarship opportunities. Focusing communication on these benefits may promote buy-in from students and families.
- **Expand tutoring opportunities by leveraging partnerships and/or by building in time during the school day.** Near-peer tutoring models can be leveraged via existing partnerships with organizations such as College Possible or through new partnerships with AmeriCorps volunteer programs.[5] These partnerships could offer additional tutoring opportunities to students without placing added burden on teachers. Additionally, participating students reported they did not feel as though they were getting the adequate support needed to succeed in courses, especially for advanced mathematics courses. Utilizing available in-school opportunities, such as the flex time offered in several districts, may help facilitate more productive and accessible tutoring support. However, it is important to note that while flex time can be used for students who need tutoring, the time should also be a productive use of time for students who do not need tutoring.
- **Invite college and career representatives to fairs based on students' interests.** Students expressed appreciation when college and career fairs included representatives from institutions and industries in which they were interested in pursuing. The coordinator from District 4 shared how generally they invited college representatives to the district based on students' interests in various colleges; while participating priority cohort students from District 2 suggested a similar approach would be beneficial for college and career fairs. Using students' interests to inform the institutions and industries invited to college and career fairs could help enhance student engagement with the events.

[5] Near-peer models include relationships between students with mentors who are closer in age.

- **Ensure linguistic accessibility to college and career programming and services for students and parents in the community.** The provision of materials and communications in multiple languages (e.g., English and Spanish) was widely seen as a benefit across districts; however, limited access to bilingual staff who provide college and career advising/services were noted in some districts. For the districts in which services were provided in multiple languages, participants' trust was built and they were able to more easily complete the FAFSA. Expanding access to bilingual staff and/or interpretive services and activities (e.g., bilingual counselors/advisors, translated materials, events offered in Spanish, Spanish-speaking community/parent liaisons) may enhance student and parental awareness and engagement in postsecondary college and career planning activities.
- **Explore how the financial aid graduation requirement has influenced students' beliefs on the viability of college enrollment following high school.** Anecdotally, participants shared positive beliefs and stories regarding how the requirement has affected students' postsecondary plans, sharing how completion of the requirement alerted students to the affordability of postsecondary institutions given the amount of financial aid they were awarded that resulted in additional students enrolling in college. In the final year of the evaluation, the evaluation team could explore how the requirement has affected students' and parents' perceptions of the affordability and feasibility of receiving a postsecondary degree.
- **Establish connections between GEAR UP and existing programs/initiatives within the state that are focused on addressing the teacher shortage to promote a stronger pipeline of teachers.** Teacher shortages have continued to place strain on the GEAR UP districts as they struggle to identify qualified staff who are interested in working in the rural, high-need communities. Establishing connections with existing programs in the state already actively seeking to address the teacher shortage may help identify new resources, programs, or incentives available to districts to promote a pipeline of qualified teachers.[6]
- **Consider further programming or initiatives focused on sustaining efforts to increase rigor after the grant ends.** Although academic rigor was a focus area of GEAR UP at the start of the grant, learning loss associated with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic and the ongoing teacher shortage exacerbated the need to reprioritize academic rigor within GEAR UP districts. In Year 6, districts shared positive progress related to addressing rigor, supported by their partnerships with TNTP and TNTP-led activities such as train-the-trainer models. Continuing to explore programming or initiatives centered around implementing, assessing, and increasing rigor may help to drive improvements in student college and career readiness beyond the grant cycle.
- **Consider expanding the use of individualized and targeted approaches to providing PD from the onset of college and career advising initiatives.** Early in

[6] The Teacher Incentive Allotment, established through House Bill 3, 86th Texas Legislature, and Grow Your Own are existing initiatives focused on providing supports to promote teacher staffing in high-need and rural districts across the state.

grant implementation, as reported in the Year 3 Annual Implementation Report, district participants reflected on how TNTP services did not always reflect a deep understanding of the unique context and needs of districts (Spinney et al., 2021). In subsequent grant years, TNTP shifted their approach to a more individualized district-led approach, which has continued to be appreciated by districts. The provision of individualized and targeted PD that is specially tailored to districts' needs and contexts may enhance buy-in and PD effectiveness.

- **Explore ways to gather feedback on the implementation and perceived success of persistence coaches.** To support students' transition from high school to college, TEA noted they were in the planning phase of connecting with persistence coaches who would be working with the class of 2024 students for the latter half of Year 6 through their first year in college. Year 7 evaluation activities may be designed to gather feedback on the extent to which planned activities were implemented and perceptions regarding the success of these types of postsecondary supports.

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