

# Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

## Annual Implementation Report

### Evaluation of Year 7

**Submitted to:**

Texas Education Agency  
William B. Travis Building  
1701 North Congress  
Avenue  
Austin, TX 78701-1494

**Submitted by:**

ICF  
1902 Reston Metro Plaza  
Reston, VA 20190

and

Agile Analytics  
1621 West 6th Street  
Austin, TX 78703

**Submitted:**

August 2025



## Executive Summary

In its seventh and final year, the Texas Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): Beyond Grad (referred to as “GEAR UP” in this report) made significant strides in promoting college and career readiness among students from low-income schools in Texas during the 2024–25 school year. Funded by a \$24.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education awarded to the Texas Education Agency in 2017, GEAR UP aims to narrow the state's college achievement gap. It offers services to around 10,000 students across twelve campuses within six rural Texas independent school districts located in West Texas, Southeast Texas, and the Coastal Bend region.

## Program Overview

GEAR UP provides 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). Core GEAR UP strategies intended to close the college achievement gap include: 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).

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. 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. In Year 7, TEA partnered with College

### Grant Goals and Objectives

By implementing core strategies and grant activities, GEAR UP seeks to meet several project goals and objectives related to 1) rigorous coursework; 2) promotion, graduation, and postsecondary outcomes; 3) educator training; 4) college entrance exams; 5) activities and services that provide information to students and families; 6) Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and college application completion; 7) community partnerships; and 8) statewide college- and career-readiness activities.

Possible to provide access to advising specialists for class of 2024 students who graduated from high school last year. Advising specialists helped class of 2024 students navigate their postsecondary options, including college and career processes and decisions. TEA also continued to partner with TNTP (formerly referred to as The New Teacher Project) to provide targeted PD related to various components of the grant.<sup>1</sup> Finally, TEA partnered with Texas OnCourse (TXOC) to develop curricula, including the TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program (TXOC Academy).

Importantly, TEA envisioned using GEAR UP to not only improve college access and success at all six participating grantee districts but also to implement successful college access strategies statewide. To do so, GEAR UP program staff are piloting a range of innovations at the grantee districts, including efficient advising models, strategic partnerships, and different technology solutions (which include solutions offered through TXOC such as MapMyGrad).<sup>2</sup> Resources have been developed in partnership with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

## Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

In November 2019, TEA contracted with ICF and Agile Analytics to conduct an external, mixed-method evaluation of GEAR UP to measure program impact, implementation, and sustainability, with a focus on identifying best and promising practices and examining statewide reach (see Appendix B for a program logic model that depicts the evaluation design). This report presents findings from the implementation study during the seventh year—school year 2024–25. Findings were derived from data collected via online stakeholder surveys and virtual interviews and focus groups (see Appendix B for full methodological details). The report highlights GEAR UP implementation, promising practices, and sustainability planning initiatives occurring during Year 7 (see Appendix B for the list of evaluation questions used to guide the implementation study).

## Key Findings

In its final year, participating districts continued to show progress with secondary initiatives focused on professional development, college and career readiness and awareness, and financial aid, and postsecondary initiatives focused on student success.

### Professional Development

The majority of core content teachers participated in PD sessions focused on academic rigor (85%), particularly in English Language Arts (ELA), with substantial growth attributed to TNTP support. Dual credit or Advanced Placement (AP) courses were offered at all districts, with enrollment increasing due to early exposure and support from advisors and educators. Students appreciated dual credit courses in high school and were satisfied with personalized and targeted tutoring in mathematics and science.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about MapMyGrad, please visit the Texas OnCourse [website](#).

## College and Career Readiness and Awareness

Preparation for college entrance exams, such as the SAT, ACT, and the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment, included bootcamps, practice tests, and financial support for test fees. College and career activities, including individual advising, college visits, college fairs, and work-based learning, provided essential postsecondary information to high school students. Parents also engaged in special events and advising sessions, though communication delays and limited information were noted.

## Financial Aid

Financial aid initiatives continued to help students and families complete FAFSA or Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA) applications through workshops and outreach. Despite challenges with FAFSA availability impacting submission timelines nationwide for the second year in a row, most parents and students found financial aid resources to be useful. High school students showed positive postsecondary aspirations, with many planning to continue their education after high school, despite expressing some uncertainty about post-high school plans and financial concerns.

## Postsecondary Success

The Year 7 evaluation of GEAR UP also highlighted the postsecondary experiences of the class of 2024 in their first year of college. Most surveyed students were enrolled in college full-time (65%), had chosen majors (85%), and planned to re-enroll next year (80%). GEAR UP supports provided during high school, such as college fairs, advisors, and college visits, were reportedly instrumental for class of 2024 students in preparing them for their plans after high school. Balancing academics and work remained challenging for class of 2024 students; however, advising specialists played a crucial role in addressing these challenges, providing career planning, study skills, emotional support, and financial aid guidance. Barriers to postsecondary support included outdated contact information and students' limited awareness of the availability of advising services.

As the grant comes to its conclusion, participating districts also reflected on sustainability of grant initiatives and activities and promising practices.

## Sustainability Reflections

**As participating districts reflected on the sustainability of grant initiatives and activities, districts highlighted key barriers, including financial constraints, staff shortages, and leadership turnover. Early grant initiatives such as algebra camps and middle school advising showed success in preparing students for high school.** TNTP's support was seen as essential but uncertain for future sustainability as districts were not sure they would be able to continue receiving the same level of TNTP support. In-person college tours also faced funding challenges as visits are generally costly and virtual visits were perceived to be less effective. School personnel valued college advising and college visits as key priorities for sustainability but also noted they are the most challenging to sustain without GEAR UP support.

Differences between Year 6 and Year 7 data for the class of 2024 and class of 2025 revealed insights into grant priorities and sustainability. Both cohorts found their courses moderately challenging, with similar tutoring participation. Class of 2024 students had higher engagement in

test preparation and advising activities, and more had completed at least one college application than the class of 2025. Postsecondary plans and aspirations were aligned for both cohorts. However, in terms of college and career advising, more class of 2024 students had met with counselors, participated in college and career fairs and visits, completed college applications, and college entrance exams, compared to the class of 2025. Even so, FAFSA/TASFA completion rates were similar.

## Promising Practices Reflections

**Reflecting on the entirety of the grant, GEAR UP stakeholders shared valuable promising practices such as securing early buy-in, effective communication, and data-driven decisions. Essential GEAR UP initiatives included college visits, financial aid guidance, and personalized advising support.** TEA staff and coordinators noted the transformative impact of GEAR UP, fostering a college-going culture and providing crucial support, especially in smaller and rural districts. Overall, district staff expressed satisfaction with grant progress noting how the grant empowered and improved opportunities for students.

## Promising Practices During Year 7

Promising practices cited throughout this report in call-out boxes reflect various innovative strategies reported as successful by grant stakeholders who participated in interviews and focus groups. In Year 7, the evaluation team noted several promising practices by districts that align with different GEAR UP strategies:

- **Tailor PD to each school and assign one TNTP staff person to each district.** GEAR UP schools appreciated a more tailored approach to PD that addresses districts' unique needs rather than imposing a one-size-fits all solution on supporting schools. Having one TNTP staff assigned to a school reportedly helped to garner buy-in and build relationships and trust over the course of the grant.
- **Strengthen partnerships with colleges to enhance dual credit options.** A school administrator with District 1 described how over time they built a stronger relationship with an advisor at a local college that is known for its workforce training programs. Over time, they have enhanced their communication and frequently text with the advisor to discuss programs such as welding and ways to expand these programs to other schools and districts.
- **Help students transition to college through networking opportunities with current college students.** Participating staff from two districts (Districts 3 and 6) expressed the value of opportunities in which high school students were able to network and communicate directly with current college students, either during college visits or by participating in summer programs located on college campuses. District 6 used grant funds for high school students to experience summer programs on college campuses, which helped students transition into college life more smoothly.
- **Use a near-peer mentor model for students.** To help build trust, District 4 partnered with Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) tutors who were high school alumni. The alumni visited high schools to provide mentoring to current students, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related subjects. Advising specialists

from College Possible also noted the importance of being closer in age to the college students they were providing postsecondary support to as it helped them connect and build rapport more easily.

## Recommendations

The evaluation team has identified the following recommendations for TEA to consider in future grant implementation and similar programming outside of GEAR UP. Recommendations are grouped into three categories.

### ACADEMIC RIGOR AND INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY

- **Initiate early and consistent dialogue among staff to define and maintain a common vision for academic rigor.** Academic rigor was a key focus of GEAR UP from the beginning of the grant; however, districts reported the greatest success when they continuously refined their vision for academic rigor each year through ongoing conversations and by participating in PD aimed at increasing rigor. This was especially important during this grant cycle as districts experienced ongoing challenges related to the teacher shortages, district leadership turnover, and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Districts found success enhancing rigor by implementing high-quality instructional materials with fidelity to ensure effective teaching and to promote students' academic success. Establishing these practices early in the grant period and maintaining them throughout its duration can help enhance outcomes and sustain progress. Even though personnel believed teachers were teaching at higher levels, students continued to struggle to meet expectations, suggesting a need for additional support and vertical alignment.
- **Prioritize providing adequate support for students taking advanced courses and earning dual credits.** Ensuring that dual credit courses are offered in person rather than virtually can mitigate challenges and improve students' academic success by allowing them to experience both the workload and the atmosphere of a college campus. This approach not only prepares students academically but also helps them acclimate to the environment of higher education, fostering a deeper understanding of college life and expectations. While not always possible, having, at a minimum, a qualified teacher in the classroom with the students during the dual credit courses would provide additional support for students completing courses in a virtual environment.
- **Adapt teaching methods and advising supports to align with students' technology-driven learning styles.** As with previous years, there were ongoing reported challenges with student engagement and academic readiness in Year 7. One GEAR UP coordinator discussed how students' learning styles were heavily influenced by technology and described an opportunity to better engage students by more effectively using technology in the classroom. An advising specialist also noted the advantage of engaging with postsecondary students via technology, explaining how this prompted students to feel more comfortable and open up more. Ensuring equitable access to updated technology can also help bridge socioeconomic gaps that affect education. Particularly with the advent and rapid growth of artificial intelligence, teachers need PD to effectively keep pace with new technology tools to help foster creativity and active learning among students.



- **Dedicate ample time building relationships, learning about districts' unique local contexts, and demonstrating the value of PD to garner buy-in.** There was improved growth in the relationship between TNTP and districts over the course of the GEAR UP grant, culminating in observations by TNTP staff that “this has been by far the most impactful of any of the years I've been on the project.” TNTP and districts attribute this growth to investing time fostering strong relationships and by TNTP being able to demonstrate the value of PD and coaching over time. Building this trust required adaptability to staff turnover and consistently seeking to better understand the local context and needs of schools. Investing in these relationships and showcasing the impact of PD has the potential to lead to cultural shifts within schools, encouraging higher levels of staff engagement and buy-in over time.

## COLLEGE AND CAREER ADVISING AND EXPLORATION

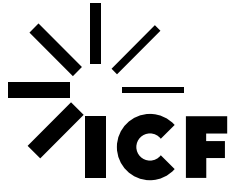
- **Prioritize defining and aligning the roles of advisors and counselors throughout the duration of the grant period and especially as the grant ends.** Establishing a clear and unified vision for responsibilities is essential to ensuring the sustainability of college and career advising and counseling initiatives once grant funding ends. Over the course of the grant period, some districts successfully transitioned college preparedness and readiness activities to a team of college and career advisors allowing counselors to focus on the students they were already serving with course enrollment. Regular joint meetings between advisors and counselors helped align their activities and improve outcomes. Miscommunications and a lack of shared vision between district personnel and coordinators can create difficulties in scheduling and implementing activities. Fostering consistent communication and collaboration among staff to maintain a cohesive approach to counseling and college and career advising can ensure that the progress made during the grant period is sustained, and students continue to benefit from well-coordinated college and career advising services.
- **Prioritize assessing students' career interests to ensure alignment with career fairs and work-based learning opportunities.** In Year 7, fewer students reported that their career was not represented at career fairs compared to Year 6, suggesting improved inclusivity and planning by districts. Additionally, districts are encouraged to schedule college and career fairs earlier in the school year to foster greater student engagement as districts shared that they had seen less student engagement when these events are held at the end of the school year.
- **Adopt an inclusive approach and cast a wider net when selecting students to participate in college visits, ensuring opportunities are open to all students—not just those excelling academically.** Allowing a diverse range of students, including those who may not traditionally be considered “college-bound,” to attend college visits may broaden their perspectives and inspire future aspirations. For example, staff from one district emphasized the value of including students beyond the typical “A-student” category on college visits. Additionally, students from rural areas or smaller schools highlighted the transformative impact of visiting colleges as these opportunities provided exposure to possibilities they might not have envisioned otherwise. One student remarked, “[The college visit] helped me realize that there is life after a small town and it’s okay to leave and go

experience these things.” By embracing inclusivity, districts can ensure that every student, regardless of their academic standing, has the chance to explore postsecondary options.

## POSTSECONDARY READINESS AND AWARENESS

- **Effective communication with parents is a cornerstone of building strong support systems for student success.** More than half of parents surveyed during Year 7 expressed the need for more comprehensive information about college and financial aid opportunities. Another half emphasized the importance of improving the overall quality of communication between schools and families. To address these concerns, school districts can take meaningful steps to bridge the communication gap and foster deeper connections with families. Recognizing the diversity of families, districts should also prioritize accessibility in communication. Newsletters can streamline the dissemination of updates and resources and providing materials in multiple languages can help ensure inclusivity. Regular updates through emails, text messages, and social media platforms can keep parents informed about critical deadlines, upcoming events, and financial aid opportunities. Strengthening these communication systems not only benefits families but also creates a collaborative educational environment where students are better prepared to transition into higher education and career paths.
- **Continue to offer support to postsecondary students on the complexities of financial aid to reduce confusion.** Advising specialists described proactively educating students about financial aid concepts, particularly the distinctions between subsidized and unsubsidized loans and the implications of the expected family contribution (EFC) on their FAFSA. Students often overlook the step of accepting their financial aid through school portals after receiving award notifications, leading to unnecessary delays or missed opportunities. Postsecondary supports for students should continue to emphasize the importance of promptly accepting aid and ensuring students fully understand the types of assistance available, such as Pell Grants. A common misconception among students was interpreting a zero EFC as an indication they would receive no financial aid. Addressing these misunderstandings and explaining how the EFC is calculated can enhance students' ability to navigate their financial aid options effectively and with confidence.
- **Optimize postsecondary student engagement by obtaining high school students' contact information and buy-in before graduation.** In Year 7, TEA collaborated with College Possible to offer advising specialists for class of 2024 students who graduated from high school last year. Advising specialists helped students navigate their postsecondary options; however, a primary challenge faced by advising specialists was acquiring accurate contact information for students and the lack of awareness students had about the services available to them. Prior to graduating, actively advertising support options available to students after they graduate through texting platforms would be beneficial. Advising specialists discussed the effectiveness of text messaging, phone calls, emails, and webinars in reaching students, but they also mentioned the challenges of disconnected numbers, language barriers, and outdated contact information. Texting platforms have been successfully used by other GEAR UP grantees (for example, West Virginia's Txt 4 Success platform) to maintain access and engagement with students after high school. By employing innovating texting tools, districts can ensure that students stay informed about the resources available for navigating their postsecondary options.





---

**icf.com**



[twitter.com/ICF](https://twitter.com/ICF)



[linkedin.com/company/icf-international](https://linkedin.com/company/icf-international)



[facebook.com/ThisIsICF](https://facebook.com/ThisIsICF)



[#thisisicf](https://instagram.com/thisisicf)

---

## About ICF

ICF (NASDAQ:ICFI) is a global consulting and digital services company with over 7,000 full- and part-time employees, but we are not your typical consultants. At ICF, business analysts and policy specialists work together with digital strategists, data scientists and creatives. We combine unmatched industry expertise with cutting-edge engagement capabilities to help organizations solve their most complex challenges. Since 1969, public and private sector clients have worked with ICF to navigate change and shape the future. Learn more at [icf.com](https://icf.com).