Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

Years 5–6 Biennial Impact Report

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Executive Summary

The Texas Education Agency's (TEA's) Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): Beyond Grad grant program (referred to as "GEAR UP" in this report) serves approximately 10,000 students from six Texas independent school districts, including 12 middle schools and high schools in rural communities in West Texas, Southeast Texas, and the Coastal Bend.

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).

Evaluating GEAR UP and the Purpose of this Report

This report presents findings from the impact evaluation during later years of the grant program—school years 2022–23 (Year 5) and 2023–24 (Year 6)—and focuses on the following evaluation questions:

- What outcomes are associated with participation in GEAR UP? How do these differ by district? How do trends in outcomes for the class of 2024 GEAR UP cohort students compare to state averages?
- How do trends in outcomes for the class of 2024 GEAR UP cohort students compare to a carefully matched sample of class of 2024 students in similar districts (i.e., the matched comparison cohort)?
- How do trends in outcomes for the class of 2024 students compare to students who are in the priority cohort (e.g., the classes of 2023 and 2025, the retrospective and follow-on cohorts)?
- How do trajectories of outcomes differ based on the length of time students attended GEAR UP schools? For example, does Algebra II completion increase for students who attended GEAR UP schools in all grades compared to students who only attended in high school?

The external evaluation consists of a longitudinal design that spans 6 years and follows a cohort model. There are four key cohort groups in the study:

- The **class of 2024 GEAR UP cohort** includes students at the six GEAR UP districts who received targeted services.

- The **matched comparison cohort** consists of a statistically matched sample of students also from the class of 2024 attending similar districts who did not participate in GEAR UP.
- The **retrospective cohort** includes students who attended GEAR UP districts 1 year prior to the start of the grant. These students are from the class of 2023 and received GEAR UP services as part of the priority cohort.
- The **follow-on cohort** includes students who attended the GEAR UP districts 1 year after the class of 2024. These students are from the class of 2025 and received GEAR UP services as part of the priority cohort. This cohort only had data for outcomes from Grade 11.

This report focuses on Years 5 and 6, when the class of 2024 was in Grades 11 and 12. The outcomes examined were related to key project objectives (see Appendix A). They are organized into to broad categories: **college readiness** (including advanced course completion, earning dual credit, standardized test taking, and completion of financial aid applications) and **high school graduation** (i.e., on-time graduation and graduating under the Foundation High School Program [FHSP] with endorsement or at the Distinguished Level of Achievement). When interpreting findings, it is important to remember that the outcome data used in this report are different than the data sources used in other GEAR UP reports such as previously published annual project outcome reports (e.g., Lamb, 2023; Wang, 2024).

Summary of Findings

Findings fall into three primary categories: assessing the impact of GEAR UP compared to a "business as usual" condition at non-GEAR UP schools (i.e., the matched comparison cohort) and contextualizing those findings with performance targets; comparing the class of 2024 to the priority GEAR UP cohorts; and assessing outcomes for the class of 2024 by length of time in cohort.

Impact of GEAR UP on Colleges Readiness and Graduation Outcomes

Table ES.1 presents results from analyses comparing the class of 2024 GEAR UP cohort to the propensity score matched (PSM) comparison group. These analyses explore the impact of attending a GEAR UP school versus attending a non-GEAR UP school.

The first column lists each of the outcomes that were explored as well as whether that outcome was associated with a GEAR UP project objective or had state average data available (see Appendix A for all GEAR UP project objectives). The second column presents the overall frequencies from the class of 2024, with the range of frequencies for each GEAR UP district included in parentheses. The third and fourth columns present outcome frequencies for the class of 2024 and matched comparison analytic samples (that is, students who were statistically matched using PSM on demographic characteristics and baseline academic outcomes). Not all class of 2024 students were able to be matched in the PSM, which is why the percentages for the class of 2024 GEAR UP analytic sample are slightly different from the average percentage for the class of 2024 as a whole.

Next, the results of two types of statistical testing are presented for analyses conducted with the analytic samples. First, chi-square tests (fifth column) present any statistically significant differences between the two groups without controlling for any covariates—including differences between schools or in student characteristics that did not reach baseline equivalence standards in the PSM. The final (sixth) column presents the results of the multilevel models (MLMs) that include these covariates and account for these differences. This final column offers a more conservative estimate of whether participation in GEAR UP was associated with each outcome after adjusting for school effects and any baseline differences between groups.

How do trends in outcomes for the class of 2024 GEAR UP cohort students compare to a carefully matched sample of class of 2024 students in similar districts (i.e., the matched comparison cohort)?

Key Takeaway:

The class of 2024 cohort had similar performance to the matched comparison cohort for nearly all outcomes; however, they had a notably higher Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)/Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA) completion rate. While there was no significant difference in the percentage of students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard, the class of 2024 cohort performed significantly lower in meeting the Masters Grade Level standard on State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®) U.S. History end-of-course exam in Grade 11.

Overall, the data show a wide range of variation in class of 2024 GEAR UP outcomes across districts as shown by the ranges in the second column. The MLM results should have greater weight than the chi-square test results in the interpretation of findings as the MLM results account for the district variations. **When focusing on the MLM results, there is no difference between the GEAR UP group and comparison group for most outcomes. This suggests that, for the class of 2024, attending a GEAR UP school did not significantly impact most outcomes** (Table ES.1).

Table ES.1. Outcomes Used in the GEAR UP Study: Class of 2024 and Matched Comparison Results

Outcomes	Average Percent for All GEAR UP Districts (Ranges Across Districts)	Percent of Matched Analytic Samples		Analysis Results: Class of 2024 vs. Matched Comparison	
	Class of 2024	Class of 2024[1]	Matched Comparison	chi-square	MLM
Completed Algebra II by Grade 11	60% (32%–88%)	62%	67%	lower	ns
Completed Algebra II by Grade 12	75% (49%–92%)	77%	84%	lower	ns
Completed AP course by Grade 11	33% (0%–46%)	35%	27%	higher	ns
Earned College Credit by Grade 12	33% (19%–96%)	34%	36%	ns	ns
Took SAT or ACT by Grade 11	67% (3%–91%)	70%	61%	higher	ns
Met College Readiness Criteria by Grade 11 on SAT, ACT, or TSIA	10% (1%–17%)	10%	7%	higher	ns
Met College Readiness Criteria by Grade 12 on TSIA	15% (4%–26%)	15%	9%	higher	ns
Met Approaches Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History in Grade 11	96% (92%–100%)	95%	96%	ns	ns
Met Masters Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History in Grade 11	25% (0%–29%)	25%	31%	lower	lower
Completed FAFSA or TASFA by Grade 12	72% (48%–92%)	76%	65%	higher	higher
Graduated On Time	91% (88%–97%)	99%	97%	higher	ns
Graduated Under the Foundation High School Plan with endorsement, or with the Distinguished Level of Achievement	90% (88%–99%)	94%	89%	higher	ns

Source. College Board SAT, ACT, and Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) data, 2020–21 to 2023–24. Texas Education Agency (TEA), Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), 2020–21 to 2023–24. TEA State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) U.S. History, spring 2023.
Note. ACT – ACT college admissions exam. AP – Advanced Placement. FAFSA – Free Application for Federal Student Aid. ns – not significant in multilevel model (MLM). PSM – Propensity Score Matching. SAT – SAT college admissions exam. TASFA – Texas Application for State Financial Aid. Project Objectives are listed in Appendix A. For the analysis results, "lower" indicates that the class of 2024 had a lower percentage of students achieving the outcome than the matched comparison group, and "higher" indicates a higher percentage, while "ns" means there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The analytic samples and the number of students included in each group varied by outcome, see Tables C.1.1–C.2.16, Appendix C, for all results.

[1] To be included in these analyses, students must have been statistically matched to a comparison student, which required them to have data for certain student characteristics and Grade 7 STAAR results. Therefore, the frequencies in this table are slightly different for the class of 2024 compared to Table ES.1.

That said, there were two notable exceptions where there were significant differences in the MLM:

- **GEAR UP students were significantly less likely to have met the Masters Grade Level standard on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®) U.S. History end-of-course exam in Grade 11 than the matched comparison group.** Academic rigor and academic achievement more broadly are a focus of GEAR UP; however, as documented in the annual implementation reports for Years 1–6, there was not an explicit focus on U.S. History or social studies performance more broadly, particularly compared to other content areas related to English Language Arts (ELA), science, and math (Spinney et al., 2021a; Spinney et al., 2021b; Spinney et al., 2022; Lamb et al., 2023; Kennedy et al., 2024).
- **GEAR UP students were significantly more likely to have completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA) by Grade 12 compared to the matched comparison group.** Given the intensive focus placed on financial aid counseling, financial literacy, and college advising in the GEAR UP program (noted in more detail in in the annual implementation reports for Years 1–6), this finding does point to a logical and directly positive impact of the program on this outcome. This is even more notable given nationwide challenges and delays with the FASFA in the 2023–24 academic year.

What outcomes are associated with participation in GEAR UP? How do these differ by district? How do trends in outcomes for the class of 2024 GEAR UP cohort students compare to state averages?

Key Takeaway:

Although many outcomes did not meet goals related to college readiness, graduation outcomes were met for the class of 2024. There were very large differences in outcomes by school.

In addition, for the outcomes that were connected to specific GEAR UP program objectives and had targets listed, in general those targets were not met except for the two graduation outcomes—graduating on time and graduating under the FHSP with an endorsement or with the Distinguished Level of Achievement. In both cases, the class of 2024 exceeded the targets.[2]

Outcomes for the Class of 2024 Compared to the Priority Cohorts

Students in the class of 2024 received targeted GEAR UP services, such as academic tutoring, college and career advising, financial aid workshops, campus visits, and mentoring, all designed to support their college readiness and long-term success. Students in the priority cohort, on the other hand, received basic GEAR UP services such general college and career information disseminated through various channels (e.g., newsletters, emails) and access to college and career advising spaces. Additionally, students in the priority cohort received benefits related to

[2] Findings are only related to project objectives when those objectives exactly match the data we obtained. For example, Project Objective 5.2 sets a target for meeting the college readiness criteria on SAT, ACT, and TSIA by Grade 12, but data were only available for all three exams in Grade 11, so there is no target listed.

GEAR UP, such as professional development for teachers and more emphasis on advanced coursework. Follow-on cohort data can additionally shed light on the sustainability of program practices. Initial analyses of baseline differences between the cohorts revealed several significant differences. Therefore, logistic regression analyses that take these differences into account are the best indicator of true differences between the groups and are reported in this section.

How do trends in outcomes for the class of 2024 students compare to students who are in the priority cohort (e.g., the classes of 2023 and 2025, the retrospective and follow-on cohorts)?

Key Takeaway:

Compared to the priority cohorts (which received some basic GEAR UP services), the class of 2024 had better results on three of the college readiness outcomes and worse results on five outcomes, indicating that there was not a consistently positive effect of targeted GEAR UP services on the college readiness outcomes measured.

Similar to findings for the matched comparison cohort, the class of 2024 had a lower percentage of students than the retrospective cohort for completion of Algebra II by Grade 11 and 12 and achieving the Masters Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History. The class of 2024 also had lower percentages of students who completed an Advanced Placement (AP) course by Grade 11 and completed FAFSA/TASFA by Grade 12 than the retrospective cohort. On the other hand, the class of 2024 had higher percentages of students who met the college readiness criteria for the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) by Grade 12 and who met the Approaches Grade Level standard on STAAR U.S. History.

The class of 2024 had lower rates of completion for Algebra II in Grade 11 compared to the follow-on cohort (the only grade in which this outcome was measured for that cohort), but they had higher rates of meeting college readiness criteria on SAT, ACT, and TSIA than the follow-on cohort.

In terms of graduation outcomes, both the retrospective cohort and the class of 2024 had the same on-time graduation rate, but the class of 2024 was more likely to graduate under the FHSP with endorsement or at the Distinguished Level of Achievement. See Table ES.2 for outcome comparisons.

Table ES.2. Differences in Outcomes for the Class of 2024 and Priority Cohorts

Outcome	Logistic Regression Analysis Results	
	vs. Retrospective Cohort	vs. Follow-On Cohort
Completed Algebra II by Grade 11	lower	lower
Completed Algebra II by Grade 12	lower	NA
Completed AP course by Grade 11	lower	ns
Earned College Credit by Grade 12	ns	NA
Took SAT or ACT by Grade 11	ns	ns
Met College Readiness Criteria by Grade 11 on SAT, ACT, or TSIA	ns	higher
Met College Readiness Criteria by Grade 12 on TSIA	higher	NA
Met Approaches Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History in Grade 11	higher	ns
Met Masters Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History in Grade 11	lower	ns
Completed FAFSA or TASFA by Grade 12	lower	NA
Graduated On Time	ns	NA
Graduated Under the Foundation High School Plan with Endorsement, or with the Distinguished Level of Achievement	higher	NA

Source. College Board SAT, ACT and TSIA data, 2019–20 to 2023–24. Texas Education Agency (TEA), Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), 2019–20 to 2023–24. TEA State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), spring 2017, 2018, spring 2023, spring 2024.
Note. NA – Not Applicable. ACT – ACT college admissions exam. AP – Advanced Placement. FAFSA – Free Application for Federal Student Aid. ns – not significant in multilevel model (MLM). PSM – Propensity Score Matching. SAT – SAT college admissions exam. TASFA – Texas Application for State Financial Aid. TSIA – Texas Success Initiative Assessment. For the analysis results, "lower" indicates that the class of 2024 had a lower percentage of students achieving the outcome than the priority cohort group (retrospective cohort or follow-on), and "higher" indicates a higher percentage, while "ns" means there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The analytic samples and the number of students included in each group varied by outcome. See Tables C.3.1-C.4.13, Appendix C, for all results.

Outcomes for the Class of 2024 by Length of Time in Cohort

Students in the class of 2024 had between 1 and 6 years of potential participation; nearly half of the students in the sample were enrolled for all 6 years. Analyses revealed that students with longer participation had significantly better outcomes than students who had participated for less time on the majority of outcomes measured (see Table ES.3). However, there also were large and

How do trajectories of outcomes differ based on the length of time students attended GEAR UP schools?

Key Takeaway:

For most of the outcomes measured, students who were in the cohort for a longer period of time had better outcomes than those in the cohort for less time. These increases could have been due to GEAR UP services or pre-existing and unmeasured differences between the students.

significant differences in baseline characteristics for students participating from 1 to 3 years and from 4 to 6 years, including higher Grade 7 STAAR scores and lower rates of being identified as at risk or economically disadvantaged for those participating for a longer period of time. These differences were controlled for in the statistical model, but there may have been other unmeasured discrepancies that contributed to the differences between groups besides GEAR UP.

Table ES.3. Length of Time in Cohort and Outcomes

Outcome	Longer Time in Cohort
Completed Algebra II by Grade 11	higher
Completed Algebra II by Grade 12	ns
Completed AP course by Grade 11	higher
Earned College Credit by Grade 12	higher
Took SAT or ACT by Grade 11	higher
Met College Readiness Criteria by Grade 11 on SAT, ACT, or TSIA	ns
Met College Readiness Criteria by Grade 12 on TSIA	higher
Met Approaches Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History in Grade 11	higher
Met Masters Grade Level Standard on STAAR U.S. History in Grade 11	ns
Completed FAFSA or TASFA by Grade 12	higher
Graduated On Time	higher
Graduated Under the Foundation High School Plan with Endorsement, or with the Distinguished Level of Achievement	higher

Source. College Board SAT, ACT and TSIA data, 2020–21 to 2023–24. Texas Education Agency (TEA), Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), 2020–21 to 2023–24. TEA State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), spring 2018, spring 2023.
Note. ACT – ACT college admissions exam. AP – Advanced Placement. FAFSA – Free Application for Federal Student Aid. ns – not significant in multilevel model (MLM). PSM – Propensity Score Matching. SAT – SAT college admissions exam. TASFA – Texas Application for State Financial Aid. TSIA – Texas Success Initiative Assessment. For the analysis results, "lower" indicates that the students in the class of 2024 participating for more years had a lower percentage of students achieving the outcome than the students participating for fewer years, and "higher" indicates a higher percentage, while "ns" means there was not a statistically significant difference related to length of time in cohort. For analytic samples and the number of students included in each group varied by outcome, see Tables C.5.1-C.5.16, Appendix C, for all results.

Study Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

This section summarizes study conclusions and limitations and provides recommendations for future studies.

Conclusions

The effect of the GEAR UP program on college readiness and graduation outcomes was largely masked by large differences in those outcomes between schools participating in the program. For example, both graduation outcomes were higher for the class of 2024 than the matched comparison cohort at the group level, but once school was added to statistical models, the effects disappeared entirely. Likewise, there were some college readiness indicators that

favored the class of 2024, and a few that favored the matched comparison cohort, but the majority of these differences also vanished once school was taken into account. Therefore, it is not possible, in the majority of cases, to disentangle school effects from program effects.[3]

There were two exceptions. First, the matched comparison cohort was more likely to achieve the Masters Grade Level standard on STAAR U.S. History than the class of 2024. We also found that the class of 2024 was less likely to achieve this outcome than the retrospective cohort. Perhaps the increased emphasis of the program in math, science, and ELA led to a decreased emphasis on social studies outcomes for class of 2024 students. Importantly, however, there were no differences in the percentage of class of 2024 and matched comparison students that achieved the Approaches Grade Level standard for STAAR U.S. History, and class of 2024 students were more likely to reach this standard than the retrospective cohort.

The second exception was FAFSA and TASFA completion by Grade 12. The class of 2024 was more likely to complete these financial aid applications than the matched comparison cohort, even after controlling for school. GEAR UP services, including individual advising and parent information sessions, directly targeted this outcome. On the other hand, class of 2024 students were less likely to complete these financial aid forms than the retrospective cohort, but rates declined nationwide in 2024 due to a "botched FAFSA rollout" that deleted information entered into forms and displayed erroneous messages to frustrated parents and students.[4]

Conditions varied between school years in other atypical ways and may have accounted for some of the differences seen between the class of 2024 and the retrospective and follow-on cohorts. For example, Algebra II rates were lower for the class of 2024 than both the retrospective cohort and the follow-on cohort. Class of 2024 students were in Grades 8 and 9—the typical years that students take Algebra I—during the height of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Therefore, the class of 2024 may have been more likely than the other two cohorts to have missed some fundamental mathematics skills that made them less likely to complete more advanced courses in later years. Standardized tests also often change from year-to-year. For example, the STAAR U.S. History EOC exam was significantly redesigned for the 2022–23 school year, and statewide rates of reaching the Masters Grade Level standard declined from 44% in the 2021–22 school year (the year the retrospective cohort took the exam) to 39% (the year the class of 2024 took the exam). Therefore, the decline seen in reaching the standard between these two cohorts could be attributed to changes in the exam itself, and not to the GEAR UP program. As a result, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the program from the broader impacts of the school year context.

The number of years spent in the GEAR UP cohort was positively related to many outcomes, including advanced coursework completion, earning college credit, meeting college readiness

[3] This means that there were differences in the outcomes between the GEAR UP schools in the study and the reasons for those differences remain unclear. They may be related to differences in how the GEAR UP model was implemented or to other school-level factors. However, the analysis did not include data on the fidelity of implementation. Collecting of this type of information along with more detailed data on student activity participation, could serve to reveal clearer connections between the program and student outcomes.

[4] See the U.S. Government Accountability Office's Botched FAFSA Rollout Leaves Uncertainty for Students Seeking Financial Aid for College.

criteria, on-time graduation, and completion of financial aid paperwork. This finding could indicate that students who participate in more GEAR UP services receive more benefits from the program. However, although statistical models accounted for measurable differences, analyses also indicated that students who participated in GEAR UP for longer periods of time differed significantly from those with shorter participation in ways that suggest unmeasured factors—such as family or peer stability—may have influenced outcomes beyond the program itself. Ultimately, this is another area where the effects of the program cannot be easily separated from other factors, leading to inconclusive results.

Study Limitations and Recommendations

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

- The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted GEAR UP programming and schooling, especially during 2019–20 and 2020–21. These disruptions make it difficult to isolate the effects of GEAR UP from pandemic-related learning loss. For example, lower Algebra II completion rates among the class of 2024 may be linked to pandemic-era gaps in math instruction.

Variability in Implementation

- There was wide variation in student outcomes across GEAR UP campuses. This was the most severe limitation to the study, making it hard to tease apart the effects of the program and local school effects.
- This finding suggests that local implementation and school-level context played a major role in shaping student experiences. As reported by Kennedy et al. (2024), schools experienced various challenges with implementing certain elements of the program—such as providing one-on-one advising services discussing coursework, scheduling, and after-graduation plans—because there were not enough advising personnel. Schools did have successes, but they varied greatly by school.
- **Recommendation:** Future evaluations should measure implementation fidelity consistently to understand how closely schools follow the intended program model. Fidelity data can clarify whether student outcomes are tied to the program itself or to inconsistent implementation. Including fidelity measures in statistical models could help explain school-level variation in results.
- **Recommendation:** Provide additional support to programs experiencing implementation challenges. The earlier this support is offered, the better.
- **Recommendation:** Future iterations of the program should carefully consider the resources available to schools when establishing the project objectives. Some objectives might be de-emphasized for those schools that have more limited resources. For example, the program could have a few primary objectives that they hope all schools will meet, and secondary objectives, that, while still important, might be de-emphasized for schools that have fewer resources.

Missing Postsecondary Data

- College enrollment, GEAR UP's primary outcome of interest, was not included due to data availability constraints at the time of the evaluation. Small-scale survey data suggest most class of 2024 students who responded were enrolled in college and planned to return, but the sample was limited and likely biased toward students who felt more successful.
- **Recommendation:** Future grants should consider timing evaluation activities to align with postsecondary data availability.

Potential Unmeasured Benefits of GEAR UP

- GEAR UP may have supported student outcomes not captured in this study, such as improved college knowledge or motivation. Survey results from Year 7 showed high student participation in advising, college visits, career fairs, and test prep.
- **Recommendation:** Future evaluations should measure these intermediate outcomes and compare GEAR UP and non-GEAR UP schools to gain a fuller picture of impact. It may be difficult to get schools to respond, but TEA could consider incentivizing participation from comparison schools to support this data collection.

Lack of Participation and Dosage Data

- The evaluation used an "intent-to-treat" approach, treating all class of 2024 students at GEAR UP schools as participants. In reality, students received varying levels of support, and some likely received no services at all. Without participation or dosage data, it is difficult to assess how specific GEAR UP activities influenced outcomes.
- **Recommendation:** Collecting and analyzing this data in the future would allow evaluators to study which services are most effective. These insights would help the program allocate resources to the highest-impact activities.