Evaluation of the Texas High School Project

First Comprehensive Annual Report
Executive Summary

Submitted to the Texas Education Agency

SRI International

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Submitted to:

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Acknowledgements

This first annual report of the evaluation satisfies *Rider 79 of the General Appropriations Act of the 80th Texas Legislative Session pertaining to the T-STEM, ECHS, and HSTW programs, which stipulates that those programs be evaluated by TEA.*

This first annual report of the Evaluation of the Texas High School Project (THSP) describes early findings for schools beginning reform implementation in the 2006–07 and 2007-08 school years. Data included in this report specifically come from the 2007-08 school year, when many THSP schools were just embarking on their THSP-related reform work. The second annual THSP evaluation report will be available in summer 2010 and will include findings from the 2008–09 school year.

Overview of the Texas High School Project

THSP supports and promotes school reform to achieve the overarching state goal of having all Texas students graduating from high school ready to succeed in college and career. THSP reforms encompass multiple approaches including increasing instructional rigor and relevance, expanding teacher professional development (PD), strengthening school leadership, increasing data use, improving teacher-student relationships, providing student academic supports, and creating school climates of respect and high expectations. THSP also provides grantees with third-party technical assistance (TA) and networking activities. District capacity and state policies further facilitate these reforms.

In contrast to most Texas education grant programs that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) funds with monies appropriated by the legislature alone, a public-private alliance (THSP Alliance) supports THSP. The $346 million THSP Alliance includes TEA, the Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (MSDF), and the Wallace Foundation.[1]

Across these funders, THSP seeds reform under different grant programs:[2]

- **Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (T-STEM) academies and centers.** T-STEM academies aim to improve student achievement through innovative and rigorous science and math instruction, with technology integrated across the curriculum. An academy may be a "school within a school"[3] or an autonomous small school. T-STEM academies are funded by TEA, CFT, or MSDF. Between the 2006–07 and 2009–10 school years, 46 T-STEM academies opened. Eight T-STEM Centers—strategically located throughout the state—also received funding. The T-STEM Centers support the implementation of T-STEM academies by providing PD, TA, and instructional materials.

- **Early College High School (ECHS).** The purpose of ECHS is to increase high school completion and encourage college enrollment. ECHS seeks to do so by providing students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education with the opportunity to simultaneously attain a high school diploma and a significant number

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[1] The total investment of $346M is as of May 2009; 59% of THSP funding came from public funds and 41% from private sources.

[2] See Chapter 6 in the First Comprehensive Annual Report of the Evaluation of THSP for complete descriptions of these grant programs.

[3] A school within a school is a smaller organizational unit typically with its own leadership, teachers, and students and with an educational program distinct from the offerings in the rest of the school.

of college credit hours (up to and including a 60-credit Associates degree) during a four- or five-year high school program. Within THSP, 29 ECHSs opened between 2004–05 and 2007–08, with TEA funding 15 ECHSs and CFT funding 14 with support from BMGF.[4] In 2008–09, four new ECHSs received funding, with another three previously-funded ECHSs receiving grants to expand to the middle school grades. Five additional grants were awarded to open small rural ECHSs. TEA expects to award approximately five to eight additional grants for 2010 through 2012 (Cycle 4).[5] As with T-STEM academies, some ECHS are schools within a school, whereas others are autonomous small schools. Many ECHSs are located on or in close proximity to a postsecondary institution campus.

- **Redesign High School Initiatives, including High School Redesign and Restructuring (HSRR), High School Redesign (HSRD), High Schools That Work Enhanced Design Network (HSTW), and District Engagement (DIEN).** The Redesigned High School Initiatives support the redesign of existing comprehensive high schools.[6] This initiative was created to transform large, low-performing high schools into places that provide personal attention and guidance to all students, offer students a challenging curriculum with real-life applications, and encourage all students to succeed. Additional information about the four grant programs identified as redesign initiatives follows.

    – The HSRR program provides high school campuses rated Academically Unacceptable (AU) under the Texas accountability rating system with resources to build the school's capacity for implementing innovative, schoolwide initiatives that are designed to improve student performance. TEA has funded 64 grantees that began implementation between 2005 and 2009 (i.e., during the first five cycles).[7]

    – The HSTW program funded by TEA supports schools to implement the national HSTW model designed by the Southern Regional Education Board. HSTW principles focus participating schools' reform strategies on improving instruction in academic and career and technical education to raise overall student achievement. The principles also emphasize creating a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement (TEA Request for Application 701-07-105).[8] Twenty schools were funded through the first two cycles of HSTW (2006-08 and 2007–09), with an additional 10 to be funded in cycle 3 (2009–11).

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[4]   The 14 CFT-funded ECHSs are included in the national evaluation of the BMGF ECHS Initiative and therefore to reduce burden to the schools are excluded from surveys or site visits for the evaluation of THSP. Only the TEA-funded ECHSs are included in surveys and site visits for this evaluation. However, because it does not place any burden on the schools, the outcomes analysis (presented in Chapter 7) does include 11 of the 14 CFT-funded ECHSs—those that began implementation in 2006–07 or 2007–08—along with the TEA–funded ECHSs.

[5]   Beginning in 2008–09, schools could be designated an ECHS through a state certification process.

[6]   "Comprehensive" high schools refer to the traditional American high school, one that typically offers a wide range of academic and elective courses, athletics, and other extracurricular activities.

[7]   Cycles 1 and 2 were part of a separate evaluation. That report can be found at http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/HighSchoolCollege/HSRR_Final_Report.pdf.

[8]   For a description of the SREB model, go to http://www.sreb.org/Programs/HSTW/publications/2005Pubs/05V07_enhanced_design.pdf.

- The HSRD program provides coaching and technical support for selected urban high schools to reorganize into smaller learning communities such as schools within schools, career academies, or autonomous schools. Six campuses were funded by CFT; they began implementation in 2006–07.

- Under the DIEN program begun in 2007–08, CFT funded four[9] high schools in Houston Independent School District (HISD) to further develop school leadership and practices that intensify academic rigor, student-teacher relationships, and educational relevance for all students under the HSTW model.

- **New Schools/Charter Schools (NSCS).** The NSCS program funds charter management organizations (CMOs) to replicate school models that have a history of achieving high performance with underserved populations and to build a network of such schools in areas of greatest need in Texas. NSCSs are funded by CFT and include IDEA Public Schools, YES Prep, Uplift, the Asia Society, and KIPP Academy. Seven schools were opened under NSCS in 2006-07 and four in 2007-08.[10]

Overview of the THSP Evaluation

The evaluation of THSP studies the implementation and effects of both the initiative overall and the specific grant programs under THSP, from 2006–07 to 2009–10 (and potentially to 2012–13). SRI International and its subcontractors, Copia Consulting, the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University, the Texas Christian University, and Triand, Inc. are contracted to conduct the evaluation, which is funded by TEA, BMGF, and CFT.

The first year of the evaluation, discussed here, addressed the following questions:

- What is the nature of early reform implementation in THSP-supported schools?

- What role do districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) play in supporting schools to implement THSP-related reforms?

- How do the reform models differ in specificity and capacity? How do reform model networks support schools in implementation?

- What implementation factors, if any, are related to early, intermediate outcomes (i.e., teacher and student attitudes and behaviors)?

- What effects, if any, have THSP and individual grant programs had (as of the 2007-08 school year) on selected ninth- and tenth-grade student outcomes?

To understand the goals, strategies, implementation, and impact of the reform efforts, the evaluation draws on multiple sources of data, including the following:

- TEA-collected data (e.g., school and student characteristics and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores) for the 2007–08 school year

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[9] In 2008–09, one school that previously participated opted out of the District Engagement program as its accountability rating improved.

[10] KIPP and Asia Society schools did not participate in original data collection (i.e., surveys and site visits) for this evaluation. They are included, however, in the student outcomes analysis using TEA data.

- Principal, teacher, and student surveys administered in spring 2008 in THSP schools that began implementation in 2006–07 or 2007–08

- Site visits in spring 2008 to a random sample of schools beginning implementation in 2006–07 that included school-level interviews with principals, administrators responsible for curriculum, instruction, teacher professional development, and student supports, and English, mathematics, and science teachers; and district-level interviews with assistant superintendents or directors of secondary education, curriculum, instruction, professional development, assessment, and accountability

- Interviews in winter and spring 2008 with representatives of key stakeholder groups including state policymakers, THSP program officers, and TA providers

This first comprehensive annual report includes findings for THSP grantees that began reform implementation in 2006–07 or 2007–08, including comparisons in student outcomes to matched, non-THSP schools. In the future, evaluation reports will incorporate schools beginning implementation in 2008–09 and 2009–10 with additional matched comparison schools. Exhibit ES-1 details the number of THSP schools funded in each program that will eventually be included in the evaluation and the number that are included in the student outcomes analysis in this report.

Exhibit ES-1
Number of THSP Schools Included in Evaluation and
Those Included in Student Outcomes Analysis, by Year of Implementation

Year of Implementation	THSP Schools Included in Evaluation Over Time					THSP Schools Included in Outcomes Analysis in First Comprehensive Annual Report		
	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	Total	2006–07	2007–08	Total
T-STEM	7	13	14	8	42	2	12	14
ECHS	0	8	6	8	22	8	8	16
HSRR	0	15	13	10	38	0	15	15
HSRD	6	0	0	0	6	6	0	6
HSTW	14	11	0	10	35	14	10	24
DIEN	0	4	0	0	4	0	4	4
NSCS	4	5	1	1	11	1	7	8
Total	31	56	34	37	158	31	56	87

Notes: The number of schools included in the outcomes analysis and the totals in the evaluation differ for the following reasons: 1. Schools are included in the outcomes analysis only once they begin serving ninth-graders; 2. Eight ECHSs funded by CFT in 2006–07 are excluded from the Evaluation of THSP except for the student outcomes analysis due to their participation in a separate national study of ECHS; and 3. Two Asia Society schools funded in 2007–08 under NSCS are also excluded from original data collection but included in the outcomes analysis.

The findings to date, based on THSP schools' early stages of implementation, offer some promising practices and identify areas for improvement that will hopefully strengthen ongoing THSP efforts. Although potential improvements in student outcomes may result from schools' participation in THSP, they are expected to lag program implementation by three to five years

(Rhodes et al., 2005). Thus, while this report provides preliminary outcomes based on up to two years of implementation, it is likely too early to draw conclusions about the effects of THSP and its component programs.

School Reform Implementation

This report discusses reform implementation across the THSP initiative as a whole and also notes where implementation appears to differ across THSP grant programs. Where appropriate, the report identifies how specific contexts such as new start-up status, charter status, or urbanicity influence implementation. This executive summary highlights the most striking findings from the first year of data collection (i.e., from 2007–08). A more comprehensive listing of key findings can be found at the beginning of each chapter in the report.

In addressing the question on the nature of early reform implementation, the evaluation found that THSP schools' reform strategies are influenced by the reform models that the schools participate in, their district initiatives, and state policies. THSP schools also undertake their reforms under different conditions. In some cases, the reforms are incremental within an existing high school, for example, HSTW, HSRR, HSRD, and DIEN are all aimed at turning underperforming, large, comprehensive high schools into effective schools. In other cases, the reforms occur through the establishment of a new school or a new school within a school—NSCS program funds new charter schools, and T-STEM academies and ECHS may be either new schools or academies created within an existing comprehensive high school. The difference in contexts matters a great deal in understanding reform implementation. Prior research has suggested that school cultures of high expectations, respect, collaboration, and continuous improvement are easier to forge in new schools than in restructured ones, where teachers and students have entrenched norms and practices (AIR/SRI, 2006).

Organizing to Support Instruction

A variety of organizational strategies are featured in the THSP reform models as promising practices toward improving instructional rigor and students' engagement in their education. These strategies– for example, creating smaller learning communities within a larger school, providing collaborative learning opportunities for teachers, and increasing teachers' use of data–are intended to create structures conducive to teachers' improving instruction, strengthening their relationships with students, connecting an academic curriculum with students' real-world interests, and developing a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement.

> **Practitioners at THSP schools espouse high expectations for student learning, but some also express reservations that reflect the difficulties of putting such high expectations into practice. Compared with comprehensive high schools, teachers and students at small and charter schools supported by THSP reported stronger agreement that faculty hold high expectations for students.**

A majority of teachers and principals surveyed (spring 2008) agreed that all students in the school can do well academically, but hold some reservations about the feasibility of putting high expectations into practice. For example, teachers are concerned that students' success or failure is due to factors beyond teachers' control. Overall, students perceived that their teachers believe

in them, but about one in four said that teachers only care about "smart" students. These results highlight that as one moves closer to the reality of the classroom, the challenges of putting into action high expectations for all students become more apparent and require strategies that move beyond positive attitudes.

In comparing the THSP redesign of existing comprehensive high schools with the newly created small school models, teachers and students in the small schools and charter schools supported by THSP—primarily falling under the T-STEM, ECHS, and NSCS programs—reported stronger agreement about faculty holding high expectations for students. Students in these schools also reported a slightly higher academic orientation among their peers and friends, and teachers perceived those students as more engaged in their learning.[11]

> **Teachers' professional learning is supported through opportunities for collaboration and PD, but those opportunities could be more strategically aligned to explicit teacher learning goals.**

Across sites visited in spring 2008, teachers in THSP schools participated in a variety of professional learning opportunities through collaboration and PD activities. Teachers valued collaboration time with their colleagues as a means of getting their work done and reported that such collaboration contributed to their professional learning. But the frequency with which teachers engaged in collaborative activities such as sharing ideas on teaching, discussing student work, and discussing student assessment data to make instructional decisions varied from a few times per year to weekly. School leaders, moreover, generally viewed teacher collaboration as a source of professional learning that would occur organically and did not express a need to guide that time with explicit teacher learning goals.

Teachers in THSP schools reported through the spring 2008 surveys that they also have access to various conferences and PD workshops. Teachers' PD opportunities, however, are not consistently strategic and useful to them, with more than half reporting that they have access only a few times a year to PD that is sustained and coherent, closely connected to their schools' improvement plans, or subject-matter specific. Almost one-third of surveyed teachers disagreed with the statement that what they learn in PD directly addresses their students' academic needs. These results suggest that schools can improve on meeting teachers' professional learning needs.

Instructional Reform

Based on site visit data collected in spring 2008, the comprehensive high schools under THSP prioritized changes to organizational structure during the opening stages of implementation and have been slower to develop clearly articulated goals and strategies for instructional change. Yet strengthening instructional rigor, making curriculum more compelling and relevant for students, and providing adequate and appropriate student supports to buttress

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[11] The differences between students attending charter and small schools and those attending traditional high schools may also reflect self-selection bias. Students and families actively choosing to attend specialized schools like T-STEM academies, ECHS, and NSCS may, for example, have a stronger academic orientation in their beliefs about the importance of succeeding in high school and expectations to attend college. This problem of self-selection bias is one confronted by all research and evaluation involving charter schools, new small schools, academies, and other schools where students make a choice to attend. Descriptions of our methods to contend with this challenge can be found in Appendix A of the First Comprehensive Annual Report of the Evaluation of THSP.

their learning are central to the THSP reforms intended to lead to the desired outcomes—higher student achievement, increased high school graduation rates, increased college enrollment, and ultimately college graduation and career success.

Teachers and leaders in THSP schools struggle to define instructional rigor and curricular relevance in the classroom.

Interviews with principals and teachers during spring 2008 site visits indicated that most comprehensive high schools under THSP lack clear definitions of rigor for classroom instruction. Leaders of those schools widely acknowledged that they need to improve instructional rigor. Consistent with a statewide effort, some school leaders identified increasing Advanced Placement (AP) and pre-AP enrollment as one strategy to raise the rigor of the overall curriculum. However, this approach does not necessarily improve classroom instruction in other types of courses. Without explicit definitions, teachers often reported relying on their own experience to understand instructional rigor, with TAKS achievement serving as the common benchmark. With respect to their instructional strategies, teachers also reported attempting to balance a focus on fundamental skills with more extended and in-depth learning opportunities, resulting in widely varying notions of rigor within departments and within schools. THSP schools are not alone in this challenge, as states and districts nationally offer a wide range of assumptions about rigor and how to achieve it.[12]

Making curriculum more relevant, like instructional rigor, is also a widely acknowledged goal among THSP principals and teachers. However, based on spring 2008 interviews with them, improving curricular relevance remains challenging. Meaningfully connecting content with students' experiences and potential career interests is largely left up to the individual teacher and varies from teacher to teacher in priority, approach, and effectiveness.

As of spring 2008, THSP schools provided primarily academic student supports, with an emphasis on TAKS preparation.

To accompany goals of more rigorous instruction and relevant curriculum, THSP reform models advocate strong student supports to shore up gaps in learning for those most in need. Based on spring 2008 site visits, THSP schools provide students with a variety of supports, most of which are academic and geared towards increasing students' success on TAKS. Most commonly, teachers offer before- and after-school tutorials, Saturday tutorials, extra TAKS preparation classes, and credit recovery programs to help students get back on track. Beyond academic supports and test preparation, however, the spring 2008 site visits indicated that few comprehensive high schools under THSP have a coherent student support strategy ensuring that students master the high school curriculum, explore their career interests, gain knowledge of college readiness expectations and application processes, build their resume, and prepare parents for the eventuality that their children will go to college.

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[12] What rigor is and how to achieve it lacks clarity nationally. Definitions of rigor are typically based on alignment with standards or assessments. For example, Florida provides incentives for schools to increase student participation in AP courses as an effort to improve rigor in the curriculum and Chicago Public Schools promote the ACT standards and adopted instructional design systems (IDS) to provide schools with comprehensive and aligned curriculum, materials, PD, and formative assessments. By contrast, the evaluation of the BMGF's High School Grants program had a focus on rigor in instruction and included "aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment with college admissions standards" and "creating opportunities for in-depth exploration of topics" among others as attributes of rigor (Mitchell et al., 2005).

District and Charter Management Organization Supports for School Reform

All THSP schools pursue reforms within their particular district contexts, or in the case of charter schools, within their respective CMO contexts. Within a state policy environment that is demanding higher standards and accountability, districts with THSP schools are proactive, to varying degrees, in creating change in their high schools.

Districts and CMOs play a crucial role in THSP schools' reform implementation.

Many schools implementing THSP reform models need to integrate, negotiate among, or trade off multiple school-level reforms, including those related to THSP, district initiatives, and possibly state intervention (i.e., schools classified as AU according to the state accountability rating system must adhere to the recommendations of a state intervention team [Campus Intervention Team]). These various efforts compete for limited time and energy among school leaders and teachers. The ultimate result is that THSP schools tend to emphasize the aspects of school reform that align with district strategies and priorities.

Based on spring 2008 site visits, the leadership in districts with schools participating in THSP generally demonstrated support for THSP-related reforms. For example, district leaders underscored their commitment to high standards, by eliminating low-level courses, using data to hold schools accountable for improvement, developing or adopting common assessments to provide teachers with instructionally relevant information, and building school leader and teacher capacity through workshops focused on instruction. Nevertheless, many THSP schools in the spring 2008 site visit sample had difficulty managing the multiple reform efforts and creating a coherent plan for reform.

CMOs serve many of the same functions as traditional districts, although depending on their development, those functions may be more or less formalized. Under the NSCS program, specific CMOs were funded to replicate successful charter campuses. This expansion meant that the "home offices" of the CMOs have had to build their capacity to develop leaders, support increasing numbers of new teachers, install procedures that standardize quality across campuses, and grapple with high facilities costs in the start-up phase before they are amortized over full enrollment. Through their efforts to manage this expansion and to ensure fidelity in model implementation, all but one of the CMOs visited in spring 2008 exercised stronger accountability mechanisms (e.g., data monitoring, observations) than districts in the site visit sample generally did.

Network Supports for School Reform

THSP invests in model-specific networks that are external to schools and districts and designed to support schools in implementing their respective reforms (i.e., T-STEM, ECHS, HSTW, and the other models that are supported through the THSP grant programs listed above). The networks may provide TA and coaching to individual schools, as well as networking activities that bring grantees together to learn from each other. At the time of data collection in 2007–08, most networks did not have a formal process for ensuring consistency in the quality, content, or usefulness of the TA they offered to schools. They were beginning to address this issue along with bolstering their capacity to provide TA to a growing number of schools.

THSP technical assistance had been focused on the needs of school leaders through 2007–08 and began shifting to a focus on instruction for the 2008–09 school year.

TA provided as part of the THSP networks tended to focus on school leaders' needs and followed a practical approach of meeting schools' most pressing concerns. Based on spring 2008 site visit data, teachers generally had little exposure to supports provided by external networks in the first year of their schools' THSP reform implementation. As networks have matured in their assistance to schools and spurred by state policies to increase rigor and college readiness, TA providers indicated in spring 2008 interviews that they were moving toward a greater focus on instruction from the 2008–09 school year forward, even though specific instructional approaches are not explicit design elements within some reform models. TA providers and network leaders also noted that shifting focus to improving instruction has implied a need for more network staff who are knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction.

THSP networks can increase the strategic role they play by sharing lessons and helping create coherence for schools facing competing demands for reform.

Although THSP encompasses multiple networks, each associated with a specific reform model, the networks share some common objectives and serve schools facing similar challenges. For example, at the core of each THSP model is the need to support teachers in increasing instructional rigor in the classroom, as well as to support traditionally underserved students to attain college and career readiness. Sharing lessons on how best to support schools in these pursuits—as of spring 2008—did not occur systematically. As additional grantees join the networks, program officers reported that ensuring adequate capacity to support schools in instituting the reform models is vitally important.

Implementation Factors Related to Intermediate Teacher and Student Outcomes

Even though THSP schools were in the early stages of implementation (i.e., within their first or second year of serving ninth-graders under THSP), it was important to begin exploring mechanisms by which THSP may affect outcomes. To that end and based on data from surveys of principals, teachers, and students in spring 2008, the evaluation team analyzed the relationships between key components of THSP reforms and intermediate teacher and student outcomes. Key components of THSP reforms included specific aspects of potentially important factors such as school leadership, teacher PD, use of data by principals and teachers, student supports, and student attitudes towards school. Analyses explored the relationship between these potentially reform-related factors and higher levels of intermediate outcomes such as teachers' expectations for students, teacher collaboration, types of instructional activities used, and students' attitudes towards academics, expectations for graduating high school and attending college, and their TAKS achievement. The results presented here pertain to THSP overall, across all grant programs (i.e., includes all schools that returned the spring 2008 surveys). The statistically significant relationships (those not likely to occur just by chance, at the .05 significance level) are summarized below.

- Teachers' and students' perceptions of higher levels of trust and respect between them were linked to both a higher sense of responsibility for student learning among

teachers and more positive student attitudes toward school. Conversely, teachers' and students' perceptions of lower levels of trust and respect between them were linked to both a lower sense of responsibility for student learning among teachers and less positive student attitudes toward school.

- Teachers' reports of greater opportunities to experience high-quality PD and collaborate with colleagues were related to more positive student attitudes about academics and high school graduation, and to greater frequency of teaching behaviors such as assigning rigorous class work requiring critical thinking skills. Teachers' reports of lower opportunities to experience high-quality PD and collaborate with colleagues were related to less positive student attitudes about academics and high school graduation, and to lower frequency of teaching behaviors such as assigning rigorous class work requiring critical thinking skills.

- Students who reported receiving higher levels of postsecondary support and preparatory experiences also had more positive attitudes toward academic improvement, effort-based learning, and the importance of school. In contrast, students who reported receiving lower levels of postsecondary support and preparatory experiences had less positive attitudes toward academic improvement, effort-based learning, and the importance of school.

- Teachers' beliefs about higher student engagement in learning were related to a higher sense of responsibility for student learning among teachers and higher frequency of teaching of advanced skills. Conversely, teachers' beliefs about lower student engagement in learning were related to a lower sense of responsibility for student learning among teachers and lower frequency of teaching of advanced skills.

- Student reports of greater parental involvement were strongly related to more positive student attitudes about school, including attitudes toward academic improvement, effort-based learning, and the importance of school; aspirations to graduate from high school; and plans to attend college. Student reports of lower parental involvement were strongly related to less positive student attitudes about school in those same areas.

Because teachers' own perceptions about student engagement and students' perceptions of support from their parents figure significantly in these intermediate outcomes, these findings suggest that school-level reform strategies need to be broad enough to reach each individual teacher and student in its target population and intensive enough to influence these individual attitudes and behaviors. The evaluation will survey principals, teachers, and students again during the 2009–10 school year. Those data will allow comparisons between early implementation reported on here (2007–08) and a maturing THSP, and will include analysis of THSP overall as well as intermediate outcomes by specific program (e.g., T-STEM, Early College, High Schools That Work, and so on).

Early Data on State Assessments and Other Student Outcome Indicators

The evaluation of THSP follows the outcomes for student cohorts starting with ninth-graders in schools beginning implementation in 2006–07. Each year, as that initial student cohort advances, the analysis includes additional grade-appropriate indicators. The analysis also

incorporates the ninth-grade cohort for schools beginning implementation each subsequent year. Thus this report includes outcome data from 2007–08 and includes both ninth- and tenth-grade students—tenth-grade students from schools beginning implementation in 2006–07 and ninth-grade students from schools beginning implementation in 2006–07 or 2007–08.

The evaluation of THSP employs a rigorous school-matching strategy to compare the THSP schools to other similar schools in the state. The strategy involves matching on both school characteristics (e.g., enrollment size, prior-year accountability rating) and student characteristics at the school level (e.g., overall student demographics, prior-year TAKS math and reading passing rates for ninth graders). After school-level matching, analyses further control for a host of school characteristics, student demographics, and prior achievement in comparing the student-level outcomes at THSP schools with those at the matched, non-THSP schools. Analyses look at the effects of THSP overall in recognition of the THSP Alliance's efforts to pursue coherent high school reform. However, the programs under the THSP umbrella have distinct goals and features that likely influence any demonstrated effects. Therefore, this and future evaluation reports also offer analyses by THSP grant program.

THSP and Grant Program Effects on Student Outcomes Compared to Matched Non-THSP Schools, Through 2007–08

To understand whether THSP is improving key outcomes for students, the evaluation team examined TAKS achievement, attendance, and measures of being on track to graduate[13] at THSP schools compared to a rigorously matched set of non-THSP schools (Exhibit ES-2). The latest available TEA data on these student outcomes pertain to the 2007–08 school year, only the first or second year of THSP implementation.[14] Therefore, the latest available data for this report represent (1) tenth-graders who have been in THSP programs for two years[15] and (2) ninth-graders who have been in the THSP programs for one year.[16] Moreover, given that the available data pertain to the first or second year of implementation, the outcomes for which one can reasonably expect to see any effects are short term. As students move through high school, the evaluation will incorporate more diverse medium- and long-term outcomes such as enrolling in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, internships, and dual-enrollment courses; graduating from high school; and enrolling in college.

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[13] Measures of being on track to graduate include fulfilling the "four by four" curriculum requirement whereby students must take four years of each of the four academic courses to graduate, beginning with the ninth-grade students in 2007–08, and passing gate-keeping courses, namely Algebra I by ninth grade and geometry or Algebra II by tenth grade.

[14] The number of schools funded under each program varies. For the analysis of tenth-grade student outcomes, two T-STEM academies, 14 HSTW, 6 HSRD, 1 NSCS, and 8 ECHS schools are included. For the analysis of ninth-grade student outcomes, 14 T-STEM academies, 24 HSTW, 6 HSRD, 15 HSRR, 4 DIEN, 8 NSCS, and 17 ECHS (one drawing from two high schools is counted as two) schools were included. See Exhibits G-5 through G-6 in Appendix G of the First Comprehensive Annual Report for the Evaluation of THSP for the numbers of schools and Exhibits F-6 through F-7 in Appendix F in the same report for the full list of schools included in the outcomes analysis.

[15] Tenth-graders who were not at the THSP school for both their ninth- and tenth-grade years are excluded on the basis that they were not part of the THSP reforms for two years as their tenth-grade peers were.

[16] For schools beginning implementation in 2007–08, the ninth-grade students were only in THSP programs for about half of a year when TAKS were administered around March to May of 2008 (depending on individual school schedules).

Exhibit ES-2
Student Outcomes Analyzed

Student Outcome Measures	Ninth Grade	Tenth Grade
TAKS reading/English	●	●
TAKS mathematics	●	●
TAKS science		●
TAKS social studies		●
Passing TAKS in all four subjects		●
Passing Algebra I by ninth grade	●	
Passing Geometry or Algebra II by tenth grade		●
Meeting "four by four" course requirement	●	●
Promoted to tenth grade		●
Percentage of days absent	●	●

Overall, THSP schools show early indications of small positive effects on a few outcomes, with no differences on the majority of outcomes, in comparison to matched, non-THSP schools. *(All results below are statistically significant at the .05 significance level.)*

- Tenth-graders in THSP schools scored slightly higher (12 points) in TAKS math than their peers in the comparison schools. Given the average TAKS scale score of 2,262 points for the THSP and non-THSP students included in the analysis, a 12-point difference may be statistically, but not educationally, significant.

- Students in THSP schools are 1.5 times more likely to be promoted to the tenth grade than are students in matched comparison schools.

THSP and matched non-THSP schools, however, did not differ on the other seven tenth-grade outcomes (as listed in ES-2) or on the ninth-grade outcomes examined. The evaluation will continue to follow these and other grade-specific outcomes and over time, differences between THSP and matched non-THSP schools may emerge.

Outcome analyses that look at student-level results for THSP overall may mask effects of the individual and diverse programs that are included under the THSP umbrella. Early outcomes suggest that differential THSP program effects may be emerging. Although some programs show promising early results on some indicators, none demonstrated consistent results across the range of outcomes analyzed.

- **T-STEM.** Tenth-graders scored 49 scale score points higher than students in comparison schools on TAKS math—a potentially promising finding for a school model that emphasizes strong mathematics curriculum and instruction. However, tenth-grade results for T-STEM in this report come from two schools only and may not generalize to the larger T-STEM program. Analyses based on three points in time

for a larger proportion of the T-STEM academies will be available in the second annual THSP evaluation report, anticipated for release in summer 2010.

- **ECHS.** Compared with students in matched non-THSP schools, tenth-grade ECHS students scored 26 scale score points higher on TAKS math, 25 scale score points higher on TAKS social studies, were two times more likely to pass TAKS in all four core subject areas, and were 2.2 times more likely to pass geometry or Algebra II by the end of grade 10. However, ninth-grade repeaters[17] in ECHS schools were also 1.5 times more likely to be absent than ninth-grade repeaters in comparison schools.

- **HSRD.** Ninth-grade repeaters in HSRD schools had a higher likelihood (1.6 times) of being absent compared with similar students in comparison schools. However, students in HSRD schools are three times more likely to be promoted to tenth grade than students in matched comparison schools, perhaps suggesting that the structural reforms associated with this model are creating personalized environments for keeping students on track to graduate.

- **NSCS.** First-time ninth-graders in NSCS schools were 40% less likely to be absent compared with students in matched non-THSP schools.

- **DIEN.** Ninth-grade repeaters were 21% less likely to be absent compared with students in matched non-THSP schools.

These initial results come early—in the first and second years—in the THSP schools' reform implementation and provide indications of potential trends that will be confirmed, refuted, or elaborated by future rounds of data collection and analysis involving increasingly larger numbers of THSP grantee schools and the students within them. The evaluation team does not consider any of the analytic results presented in this section as findings about the effects of either the THSP investments overall or about individual high school reform models. Rather, these results suggest hypotheses that we will continue to test as the evaluation proceeds.

Implications

The Texas High School Project operates in a state policy environment conducive to reforms, one of rising academic requirements in the "four by four" curriculum, new course-specific end-of-course exams (beginning with ninth-grade students in 2012), and increased efforts to better align the preparation of K-12 students with the expectations and requirements of higher education systems and the world of work. Operating within this policy framework, the public-private THSP Alliance supports diverse high school reform approaches and strategies directed at both improving existing large high schools that are struggling to serve high-need populations well and increasing the number of schools that adopt promising models for increasing curricular rigor and relevance (e.g., T-STEM Academies, Early Colleges, replications of successful charter schools). The hope is that the Alliance-funded schools will ultimately offer strong outcomes and promising lessons learned that can inform the improvement efforts of many more high schools across the state. At the same time, based on a new strategic plan aired in 2009, the Alliance will increasingly focus on documentation and dissemination of promising results and on sustaining and scaling up proven approaches to reform.

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[17] The evaluation has found that enough students fail ninth grade (i.e., fail to earn enough credits to become tenth graders) so that the category of ninth grade "repeaters" is required for accurate analyses.

As the Alliance's work on THSP continues to evolve, interview data from the spring 2008 site visits suggest that outreach about the goals of high school improvement needs to reach further into the teaching ranks than it had up to this time. District and school leaders recognize the broad goals that THSP subscribes to, but moving closer to the classroom, teachers have less perspective on the broad strokes of high school reform. Although key goals such as improving instructional rigor and curricular relevance to enhance student engagement and learning resonate with school leaders, school reform strategies have focused primarily on organizational structures. Placing instruction at the center of school reform will demand greater clarity on what constitutes instructional rigor and relevance, and broader engagement among teachers to develop a shared understanding of those concepts and how they are manifested in daily instructional activities.

Site visit and survey data from spring 2008 also suggest that student support strategies may need to be enhanced and diversified in order to reach the neediest students. With THSP's goals of advancing college readiness for underrepresented youth, much work is still needed to understand the range and types of supports that can truly move students from relatively low academic performance to an aspiration towards college and career. Based on data collected in 2007–08, few THSP schools had yet to move beyond a narrow focus on helping students pass TAKS. The evaluation will analyze the 2008–09 data carefully to determine whether more schools are embracing student support approaches that also build students' views of themselves as college goers and of school as relevant to their futures.

Spring 2008 data on the reform networks that are connected to specific THSP models suggest that these groups offer potential for increasing state capacity to support school-level reform. However, the networks often face the challenge of being external to the system, with little leverage to forge coherence for schools among competing local and state reform priorities and limited means to hold schools accountable for implementing elements of the school reform models. Going forward, as the reform networks take on instructional reform directly, their own capacity to support schools will need to evolve and they will need to build expertise in curriculum and instruction. Increased interaction among networks may yield synergies to better support schools, teachers, and students. The growth and refinement of network activities is another area that the evaluation will attend to in its analysis of data from the 2008–09 school year and will continue to probe on in years to come.

Perhaps more important, because the ultimate goal of THSP is to take lessons learned from grantee schools and districts to a larger scale, strategies that strengthen the network aspect of TA would enhance the possibility of growing a statewide cadre of high school reform experts who will be able to help other schools implement the models (or aspects of them) in the future. The first year of data collection and analysis raised questions about leveraging the considerable support infrastructure already in place to build a common statewide understanding of high school reform. For example, what role might the regional education service centers play, in tandem with model-based networks? The second evaluation report, based on data collected in 2008–09, will address this question. Early analysis of those data suggests that some technical assistance resources that support high school reform, including some THSP-related networks, are becoming better aligned.

In the future, the focus of network and TA activities may need to adjust to where the greatest need lies. For example, 2007–08 findings showed that TA efforts thus far have targeted district and school leadership, consistent with the early focus on structural and organizational changes associated with restructuring established schools or starting new ones. However, as noted above, these early findings also demonstrate that a coherent vision of the goals of high

school reform for the state has not penetrated to the classroom level—that is to teachers and their instructional strategies. This lack of visibility among teachers may change as reform efforts deepen, something that the evaluation will watch for over time. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern that where grants are relatively short lived (i.e., two years on average), schools may not get to tackling issues of teaching and learning. Indeed, this observation suggests that THSP Alliance members should be considering the issue of sustaining reform momentum, perhaps through some mechanisms for maintaining network affiliations after grants end.

Because this is a longitudinal evaluation of a sustained statewide high school reform effort, each round of data collection and analysis will raise important issues and questions that members of the THSP Alliance and other interested parties may want to consider as they move forward. Some key questions follow:

- What common definitions of rigor and relevance can be agreed on within the various THSP models and programs?

- Where and how will teachers learn about instructional rigor and relevance? Who will guide them? If there are multiple guides, how can THSP help teachers find coherence in the ideas, mandates, and assistance that they experience?

- How can THSP more effectively use and build on existing state, regional, and model infrastructures and resources to support successful high school reform?

- What is an adequate suite of supports for the most at-risk students, especially in a policy environment of increasing emphasis on rigor and college/career readiness?

Preliminary Findings from 2008–09 Data Collection

Preliminary analyses of evaluation data collected in 2008–09 (the year after the data reported on in this report) are currently underway. The available data for the next report are more limited because surveys were not administered in 2008–09. Nevertheless, information from school site visits and interviews with district and network personnel will continue to advance understanding of how THSP investments are supporting high school reform in Texas. Although analysis is ongoing, emerging trends for the second year of the evaluation appear encouraging. Preliminary findings include an increased focus on curriculum and instruction that is somewhat broader than the strong TAKS focus found in the first year; PD that is tied to instructional improvement to a greater degree; and PD that is reaching more teachers with whole teams, departments, or faculties participating. At the same time, student supports still focused heavily on TAKS preparation for those in danger of failing, and few schools offered a comprehensive suite of supports to round out the experiences of underrepresented students to attain college readiness. These findings and others will be expanded upon in the next comprehensive annual report to be released in 2010.

To download the complete report, including appendices, please go to
http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2904&menu_id=94