



Texas Public Charter School Start-Up Grant (2011–2015) Evaluation: Final Report

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Submitted to:
Texas Education Agency
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701

Submitted by:
ICF
9300 Lee Highway
Fairfax, VA 22031

Executive Summary

In 2010, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) applied for and was awarded a five-year federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant to support the planning, design, and initial implementation of new public charter schools authorized from the 2010–11 through the 2014–15 school years. Through this funding, TEA awarded Public Charter School Start-Up subgrants through a competitive process among four types of eligible charter schools that began in the 2011–12 school year. Throughout the grant period, TEA made subawards totaling around \$25.5 million to 41 grantees across four cohorts. Grantees could use funds to meet the substantial costs of starting up a charter school, through the planning phase (up to 18 months) and initial implementation phases (up to two years), in categories that included payroll, professional and contracted services, supplies and materials, other operating costs, capital outlay, and indirect costs.

Evaluation of the Public Charter School Start-Up Grant

TEA contracted with ICF to conduct an evaluation of its Public Charter School Start-Up Grant program. This contract began in July 2011 and is now complete. Through this evaluation, ICF (1) examined how grantees budgeted for and used their grant funds; (2) gathered data to understand charter school planning and initial implementation; and (3) examined charter school performance, with a particular focus on the characteristics of high-performing charter school campuses and best practices in how grantees use grant funds.

This report is the second comprehensive report to be produced for the evaluation of the Public Charter School Start-Up Grant program, and it incorporates and builds on findings from the first comprehensive report, and includes analyses and data from grantees collectively across Cohorts I–IV. In addition to analyses of grant applications, budgets, and expenditures, this report includes findings from data collected through surveys administered to charter school campus teachers, administrators, and charter holder board members and from site visits to selected Cohort I and II charter schools and all Cohort III charter schools. This report addresses all five research questions, and findings are presented in this summary by each research question.

Key Findings

Research Question 1: In what specific ways do grantees use Public Charter School Start-Up Grant funds?

Public Charter School Start-Up Grantee spending varied by charter type. Grantees operating open-enrollment charter schools spread their grant funding over a wider range of products and services, while new schools designated under an existing charter and campus charter school grantees were more likely to target their spending in a smaller number of areas. This result may be because new schools designated under an existing charter and campus charter schools were more likely to receive more services (such as legal services or financial management software) from their charter holder organizations and authorizing districts and, therefore, did not have to purchase those services themselves.

Although small differences in spending also existed between Cohorts III and IV, these differences are largely explained by the relative breakdown of the two cohorts among grantees with different charter types.

No cohort-based patterns across the four cohorts of grantees were found in grantee spending by expenditure category, but Public Charter School Start-Up Grant spending by expenditure category was related to charter type. Nearly all grantees in all charter types spent grant funds on at least one product or service related to instructional programs and materials. Grantees operating open-enrollment charter schools were more likely to spend grant funds on school facilities and equipment than grantees operating new schools designated under an existing charter or campus charter schools.¹ About the same percentage of grantees across each of the three charter types spent grant funds on staffing. Grantees operating campus charters were more likely than grantees operating open-enrollment charters and new schools designated under an existing charter to spend grant funds on professional development and on other services. Grantees operating new schools designated under an existing charter were least likely of the three charter types to spend grant funds on professional development and on other services. This is likely due to new schools designated under an existing charter having access to professional development and other services through their larger organization.

Research Question 2: What best practices can be identified in how grantees use funds?

Six best practices were culled from the analysis of data from the nine high-performing grantees across Cohorts I and II, the four grantees that participated in site visits, and additional examples from Cohort III grantees (not high-performing). Although these best practices are based on preliminary findings from three cohorts, some implications can be drawn.

Potential Best Practice 1: Spending Public Charter School Start-Up Grant funds to establish and support school culture and climate helped foster engagement and ownership. Having a clear vision from the outset of the school culture and climate that will be promoted and then devoting a proportion of funds to making this vision apparent for students, teachers, and others in the school community helped foster engagement and ownership.

Potential Best Practice 2: Building a diverse support network, specifically to assist with a variety of processes, including finance, business management, and compliance with TEA guidelines, helped with effective start-up implementation. Recognizing aspects of program development and implementation where support might be needed to build a more effective program is crucial. This strategy can make tasks seem less insurmountable, especially if guidance from experts or from those experienced in a particular area allows grantees to focus energy on other key areas that need attention.

Potential Best Practice 3: Demonstrating flexibility in planning and use of funds throughout the grant period helped grantees with implementation. An important consideration for this practice was maintaining the overall vision for the charter, while being open to changes. Successful grantees will need to exhibit some degree of flexibility in

¹ In this report, school facilities and equipment refers to expenditures related to classroom furniture, school maintenance (including salaries for custodial staff), and/or financial management software and training. In general, charters are not allowed to budget grant funds for facilities.

implementation and in how funds are used to strike a delicate balance between reinforcing a school vision established at the onset and being open to important adjustments that may emerge over time. Of equal importance is the implementation modification process; specifically, who is involved in decision making, and what data are used to prompt changes in implementation. Two aspects of the best practice of flexibility in use of funds were prevalent across grantees. First, budget revisions were carefully considered through deliberate processes such as needs assessments. Second, changes proposed through amendments did not alter, but instead enhanced, the overall vision.

Potential Best Practice 4: High-performing start-up grantees used evidence to support the use of funds to inform practice, particularly in making decisions about policies, activities, and purchases. Relying on evidence from assessments and other data sources can help inform grantees of what is working and where improvements are needed, thus helping to target instructional and management approaches. This best practice speaks again to a process of continuous improvement and refinement, based on feedback from stakeholders and student needs.

Potential Best Practice 5: Integrating technology with curriculum and instructional approaches helped grantees address gaps and reinforce their school models. This best practice goes further than simply having technology available. By closely and thoughtfully integrating technology with the overall instructional approach, gaps across subject areas can be addressed and the school model can be reinforced for teachers and students. Implementation of this best practice can have important benefits for low-income students, who may have less access to technology outside of the school environment. In addition, overall student engagement can be improved by appropriate technology integration.

Potential Best Practice 6: Using funds to create a collaborative relationship among stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and parents helped improve the school culture. Involving teachers and other stakeholders in decision making encourages a collective school culture and buy-in from staff. Throughout the best practices described, a recurring theme of fostering a collaborative environment is apparent. Being open to feedback from experts, teachers, and parents is important for improvement of processes and better outcomes. By involving stakeholders, a community of individuals invested in the charter school's success is established, and students benefit from an environment shaped to their learning needs.

3. Within high-performing charter schools, to what extent do student outcomes differ by charter school type, mission, or focus?

Student outcomes differed to some extent within high-performing charter schools based on charter type and mission. Overall there were no consistent findings to explain the relationship among charter type and academic performance, among mission and academic performance, or among charter type and attendance.

- Student academic achievement outcomes differed to some extent within high-performing charter schools based on charter type, but overall there were no consistent findings to explain the relationship among charter type and academic performance.

- Student academic achievement outcomes differed to some extent within high-performing charter schools based on charter mission, but overall there were no consistent findings to explain the relationship among mission and academic performance.
- Attendance outcomes differed to some extent by charter type, but overall there were no consistent findings to explain the relationship among charter type and attendance.

4. To what extent do student and school outcomes differ between high-performing charter schools and traditional neighborhood schools?

Student and school outcomes differed between high-performing charter schools and traditional neighborhood schools to some extent.

- Academic achievement outcomes differed between high-performing charter schools and traditional neighborhood schools to some extent over time; however, results were inconclusive due to small sample sizes.
- Attendance and grade-level promotion outcomes differed between high-performing charter schools and traditional neighborhood schools to some extent over time.

5. To what extent do student and school outcomes differ between charter schools approved and funded through the 2011–2015 competitive grant process and those approved for noncompetitive funding in 2010–11?

Student-level and school-level academic achievement differed to some extent between competitively-funded and noncompetitively-funded charter schools.

- Academic achievement outcomes differed between students in competitively-funded and noncompetitively-funded charter schools to some extent across grade levels, with students in competitively-funded charter schools performing lower than students in noncompetitively-funded charter schools.
- Students in competitively-funded charter schools exhibited rapid increases in academic achievement outcomes over time and students in noncompetitively-funded charter schools did not.
- Academic achievement outcomes of students in high-performing, competitively-funded charter schools differed significantly as time progressed from those of students in noncompetitively-funded charter schools, with high-performing, competitively-funded charter school eventually out performing noncompetitively-funded charter schools.
- Attendance outcomes of students in high-performing, competitively-funded charter schools and of students in noncompetitively-funded charter schools differed to some extent, but there were no consistent patterns over time.

Next Steps

While this evaluation is now complete, TEA has implemented a new CSP grant and will evaluate and provide findings and recommendations in the years to come.