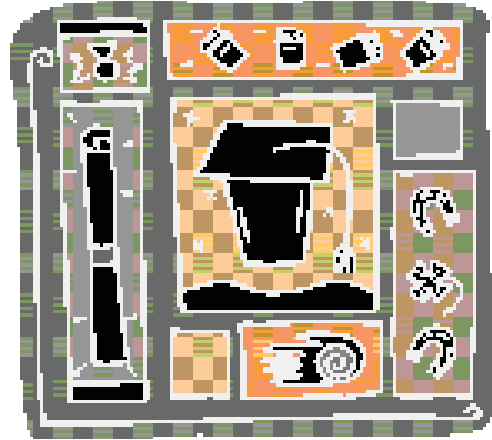


Evaluation of the Texas High School Completion and Success (THSCS) Grant Program: Final Report



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Executive Summary

Background

Over the past decade, Texas has instituted a number of programs and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of high school programs and increasing the graduation rate and success of high school students. Despite overall gains in graduation rates and student achievement resulting from these programs, certain student groups in Texas high schools continue to fare better than others. As a result, the 78th Texas Legislature, through Rider 67 of Article III of the General Appropriations Act, authorized and appropriated \$29 million in General Revenue and \$1 million in federal funds for each fiscal year of the 2004-2005 biennium to support the establishment and implementation of comprehensive high school completion and success initiatives.

The Texas High School Completion and Success (THSCS) Cycle 1 Grant Program was funded through Rider 67. The grant period for THSCS Cycle 1 projects originally extended from February 1, 2004 through August 31, 2005; however, the grant was extended to serve students through February, 2006. An evaluation of high school completion and success initiatives was also authorized by Rider 67, and was conducted by The Evaluation Group (TEG) at Texas A&M University on behalf of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The purpose of this evaluation was two-fold: 1) To document the strategies/activities that were implemented at participating campuses; and 2) To identify whether the program had beneficial impacts on student outcomes.

Methodology

The evaluation of the THSCS grant program was guided by the following research questions:

1. Who participated in the THSCS grant program?
2. How was the program implemented?
3. What impact did the THSCS program have on student outcomes?

The evaluation of the THSCS grant program proceeded in five stages. After establishing the baseline characteristics of THSCS campuses and the students they intended to serve,

campus-level data regarding implemented activities were collected at the end of each term of the grant period (Summer and Fall 2004; Spring and Summer 2005). Site visits were conducted at 29 participating campuses between March and May, 2005. Individual student-level data were collected for students who had received THSCS services during Summer 2004, Fall 2004, and Spring 2005. The fifth component of this evaluation consisted of matching THSCS campuses with comparable campuses that had not received THSCS funding, and further matching individual students across the two groups.

The evaluation relied upon five data sources: 1) The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), one of TEA's statewide databases; 2) student performance data on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), also maintained by TEA; 3) Project Progress Reports developed by TEG to obtain campus-level data from grantees; 4) Student Information Reports developed by TEG to obtain student-level data; and 3) the High School Implementation Review, developed to obtain data from leadership teams during site visits.

THSCS Campus Characteristics

THSCS, Cycle 1 grants were awarded at the end of Spring 2004 to 128 school districts and open enrollment charter schools, serving a total of 244 campuses located throughout Texas. THSCS campuses were heavily concentrated within the greater metropolitan areas of Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. Over 40% of campuses were located in major urban and suburban districts. The majority of campuses served 1,000 or more students, although 22% had enrollments of 250 or less.

The percentage of economically disadvantaged students at participating campuses was nearly 20 percentage points higher than the statewide proportion of economically disadvantaged students attending high school in Texas (60% versus 41%, respectively). Limited English Proficient (LEP) students accounted for a higher proportion of THSCS students (11% versus 7% statewide). Hispanic students also accounted for a disproportionately higher percentage of students at THSCS campuses (60% versus 39% statewide), while white students represented a disproportionately lower percentage of students at THSCS campuses (22% versus 44% statewide). The number of African

American students at grantee campuses was comparable to the percentage of African American high school students in the state, 16% versus 14%, respectively, as were the percentages of students in Special Education programs (13% and 12%, respectively).

The THSCS grant targeted students who were at risk of academic failure. This was defined within the THSCS grant guidelines as students who were deficient in credits and in danger of not graduating within four years after entering Grade 9 or students in Grade 11 who had not passed the exit-level TAKS; LEP students; and economically disadvantaged students. Based on 2003-2004 PEIMS data, 154,894 students, or 62% of the students at the campuses that received the grant, were in at-risk situations.

To be eligible to receive a THSCS grant, a high school campus must have received a rating of “Low-Performing” in 2001-2002 or an overall campus passing rate on the Grade 10 2003 TAKS test of 50% or lower. Therefore, students at campuses receiving THSCS grant funds generally had lower passing rates on the statewide assessment battery than all students attending high school campuses across the state. In all subjects (English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), passing rates for THSCS students were lower than statewide passing rates. Differences ranged from 1 percentage point (in Grade 11 social studies) to 12 percentage points (in Grade 9 mathematics and Grade 10 science). THSCS campuses similarly had somewhat higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates than campuses throughout the state. The 2004 four-year dropout rate for THSCS campuses was 6% versus 4% statewide. The 2004 four-year graduation rate for THSCS campuses was 81% versus 85% statewide.

THSCS Activities

Project campuses implemented THSCS activities during the summer terms of 2004 and 2005, and during the 2004-2005 academic year. Enrollments in each term were predominantly at-risk students, although the percentages of at-risk students enrolled in summer terms were somewhat higher than during the regular school year. Specifically, the program served 13,312 students in Summer 2004; 69,804 in Fall 2004; 67,122 in Spring 2005; and 15,521 in Summer 2005. Within each term, the percentages of students classified as at-risk were: 81%; 69%; 75%; and 87%, respectively.

To address the needs of their students, grant recipients designed programs around a series of allowable strategies and activities. These fell into seven broad categories: 1) Individualized Graduation Plan (IGP)-related activities; 2) credit accrual; 3) instructional strategies; 4) student achievement improvement; 5) expanded learning opportunities; 6) early intervention; and 7) community engagement. Grant recipients directed funds towards activities and strategies that best served the needs of at-risk and other targeted students on their campuses.

Rider 67 required schools that receive grant funds to ensure that all students have an IGP. These graduation plans must ensure that students at risk of not graduating from high school are afforded instruction from highly qualified teachers, have access to online diagnostic and assessment instruments, and are provided accelerated instruction in areas of academic weakness.

Grantee schools were successful in developing IGPs for almost all students on their campuses. The total number of IGPs developed across the four semesters of the project year was 260,080 with 156,737 developed for at-risk students. These two numbers reflect 94% and 92% of enrollment for total and at-risk students. Campuses focused on developing IGPs for students early in the grant period, particularly for at-risk students. Similarly, more students took part in online diagnostic assessment and received assistance from counselors early in the project. This finding held for both the total number of students and at-risk students.

Credit recovery programs, expanded learning opportunities and direct instruction by highly qualified teachers were the activities most frequently implemented in three out of the four semesters. Project directors also specified TAKS preparation activities and computer software programs that supported credit recovery programs as effective means of increasing the number of students who graduate from high school. The purchase of software was named by 10% of campuses as being an effective means of increasing student achievement.

Student Outcomes

Analyses of TAKS performance showed that THSCS campuses slightly outperformed campuses with similar student demographics and academic status in English Language Arts (ELA). Though comparable at baseline (in spring 2004) on TAKS ELA assessments, THSCS campuses outperformed comparison campuses on both the 2005 (70% pass rates at THSCS campuses compared to 67% at non-funded campuses) and 2006 (83% pass rates at THSCS campuses compared to 82% pass rates at non-funded campuses) assessments. While the differences in overall pass rates were small, statistical analyses adjusting for important student characteristics demonstrated this impact of program participation to be significant. Thus, the THSCS program had a positive impact on students' literacy and language arts skills. These results were not observed for TAKS mathematics performance. On that assessment, there were no differences between THSCS and comparison campuses. Positive findings also were not observed for attendance and grade retention outcomes.

Conclusions

The THSCS program met many of its goals of providing at-risk students with services and activities to help them improve their academic performance and complete high school. The impact of the program on improving student achievement occurred in TAKS ELA assessments. Impacts on longer-term outcomes, including attendance and grade promotion, may be more discernible in later years. All program effects may be stronger with adjustments to the THSCS program, including greater specification of allowable and required activities to emphasize effective strategies and activities, more focus on services for at-risk students to provide greater coherence to program activities, and provision of resources to campuses for implementation of activities with which they may have little experience. Additionally, as with most school reform programs, positive changes in practice and improvements in outcomes may take more time. Thus, programs such as THSCS may need to be extended for at least five years in order to have substantial and lasting impacts on the campuses and students they serve.

Link to report full text:

http://www.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/HighSchoolCollege/thscs_c1_evaluation.pdf