

**EVALUATION OF THE TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION
AND SUCCESS GRANT PROGRAM:
INTERIM REPORT**

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES THROUGH SUMMER 2004

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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 2004–05 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, developed with regard to the current literature on high school completion and success and in response to a series of statewide focus groups on dropout prevention, is funded through Rider 67. An evaluation of high school completion and success initiatives is also authorized by Rider 67. The Evaluation Group (TEG) at Texas A&M University has been asked to evaluate the THSCS grant program on behalf of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the impact of the activities and strategies implemented through the THSCS grant program on student achievement. The grant period for THSCS Cycle 1 projects extends from February 1, 2004 through August 31, 2005.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation of the THSCS grant program will progress in four overlapping stages, which include context, comparative, observational, and student-level data analyses. The high school campus has been identified as the primary unit of analysis; in addition, disaggregated student-level data will also be examined. Because of the timing of this interim report in relation to THSCS project implementation, the results presented in this report will focus on the first stage of the descriptive study: the context analysis. Thus, this interim report prepared by TEG describes the THSCS grant program, the research design for the entire evaluation project, the

characteristics of the campuses that received THSCS grant funds, and the activities implemented by these campuses during the first term of the grant period (i.e., Summer 2004).

In this interim report of the THSCS grant evaluation, TEG relied heavily upon two sources of information: THSCS individual campus progress reports and TEA databases, such as the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) data. The first THSCS campus progress reports, which included data from Summer 2004, provided evidence on the progress of the initial implementation phase of the THSCS grant project. The AEIS, PEIMS, and TAKS data provided detailed information on student characteristics (including both demographics and academic performance), supplying a context for the project's implementation. Descriptive statistics were computed in order to determine the baseline characteristics of participating campuses, student achievement levels, strategies/activities implemented, and students served. These detailed statistics are described below.

Characteristics of Campuses Receiving THSCS Grant Funding

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 246 campuses, located throughout Texas. THSCS campuses are heavily concentrated within the greater metropolitan areas of Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. While the majority of THSCS campuses had an enrollment of 250 or fewer students, the average enrollment of grantee campuses was 1,144. The majority of campuses, 80%, offer instruction to students in grades 9 through 12.

Approximately 60% of students on campuses receiving THSCS grant funds are Hispanic. This percentage is significantly higher than the percentage of Hispanic students in Texas high schools statewide, which is 39%. White student enrollment at THSCS campuses is 22% which is much lower than the 44% of White students enrolled in Texas high schools statewide. Thus, Hispanic students account for a disproportionately higher percentage of students at THSCS campuses, while White students represented a disproportionately lower percentage of students at THSCS campuses. 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.

While 11% of the students at THSCS campuses were identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP), seven percent of all high school students in Texas are classified as LEP. The percentages of students in Gifted and Talented and special education programs at grantee campuses are comparable to the percentages of all high schools across the state.

Approximately five percent of the students enrolled at THSCS campuses received disciplinary placement under Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code—an almost identical percentage as that calculated for all Texas high school students. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students at participating campuses is 60%—nearly 20 percentage points higher than the statewide proportion of economically disadvantaged students attending high school in Texas (41%).

To be eligible to receive the THSCS grant, a high school campus had to have a rating of Low-Performing in 2001–02 or an overall campus passing rate on the 10th grade 2003 TAKS test of 50% or lower. Therefore, students at campuses receiving THSCS grant funds generally had lower passing rates on the statewide assessment, the TAKS, than all students attending high school campuses across the state. Most notably, the percentages of ninth grade students at grantee campuses who met the standard on the 2004 TAKS tests were uniformly lower than the percentages who met the standard on the ninth grade tests statewide. Just over three quarters (77%) of the ninth graders at THSCS campuses met the state standard on the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the 2004 TAKS test, compared to 84% of ninth grade students statewide. Similarly, 47% of ninth grade students attending THSCS campuses passed the mathematics portion of the TAKS test versus 59% of all ninth grade students statewide. While economically disadvantaged students at THSCS campuses and all Texas schools performed lower on ELA and math TAKS tests than students who were not classified as economically disadvantaged, the performance gap between students attending THSCS campuses and the state average was more profound for non-economically disadvantaged students.

Similar results hold for tenth grade students—ELA and math TAKS passing rates for those attending THSCS campuses were significantly lower than the passing rates for tenth graders statewide. Interestingly, the THSCS/state performance gap narrows somewhat for students in the eleventh grade. Higher proportions of both THSCS students (83%) and all Texas eleventh

graders (87%) met the state standard on the ELA portion of the 2004 TAKS test. Just under eight out of ten students (79%) at THSCS campuses passed the mathematics portion of the TAKS test compared to 85% statewide.

For all grades, the performance gap between THSCS students and the statewide passing rates widened significantly when *all tests passed* was used as the benchmark. Less than half of ninth grade students attending THSCS campuses, 45%, passed all TAKS tests in 2004, compared to 57% statewide. Tenth grade passing rates for all tests dropped even further: 36% of the tenth grade students at THSCS campuses passed all TAKS tests taken versus 49% of the tenth graders statewide. Eleventh grade students fared the best of the three grades analyzed. Just under two thirds of the eleventh graders passed all tests taken (63%), compared to 72% of all eleventh grade students statewide.

Findings from Summer 2004

At the conclusion of the 2004 Summer term, THSCS campuses were asked to submit a progress report detailing the number of students served, the activities that were implemented using grant funds, and the number of staff involved in grant activities. What follows are the findings from the Summer term progress reports submitted by 219 high school campuses, or 89% of the 246 campuses receiving grant funds.

Students Served by THSCS Grant Funds

Based on Project Progress Reports, a total of 116,889 students are projected to be served with THSCS grant funds over the grant period (February 1, 2004 to August 31, 2005). According to 2003–04 PEIMS data, total student enrollment for the 219 campuses that responded to the first progress report is 250,561. Therefore, the number of students projected to receive grant-funded services during the grant period is just under half (47%) of the student enrollment. Across grades, ninth-graders, with 39,077 students, comprised the largest group of students to be served. Fewer students were projected to be served for each successive grade level.

The THSCS grant targets students who are at risk of academic failure, which is defined in the grant as students who are deficient in credits and in danger of not graduating within 4 years after

entering 9th grade and/or students in the 11th grade who have not passed the Exit-level TAAS/TAKS; LEP students; and/or, economically disadvantaged students. Based on 2003–04 PEIMS data, 154,894 students, or 62% of the students at the campuses receiving this grant are students in at-risk situations. Many of the students targeted by the grant were identified by their campus as being at-risk of academic failure. Accordingly, campuses reported that 70% of the students projected to receive grant-funded services are considered students in at-risk situations.

A total of 12,118 students were served through THSCS grant funds during Summer 2004 which is roughly 10% of the total number of students projected to be served through the project. In addition, 71% of the 13,649 at-risk students enrolled during the summer term received grant-funded services. Of the students who received services during the 2004 Summer term, the majority (80%) were classified as being students in at-risk situations.

On average, THSCS campuses intend to serve about half the students enrolled on their campuses and are primarily targeting students in at-risk situations. During Summer 2004, a small portion of the projected number of students received services and the overwhelming majority of students served were at risk of not completing high school in four years.

Strategies and Activities Implemented During Summer 2004

To meet the goals and objectives of the grant program, THSCS campuses selected strategies and activities from a list of allowable uses of grant funds. Funds were directed towards activities and strategies that best serve the needs of students in at-risk situations allowable under the grant. These fall into seven categories based on similarity: activities related to Individual Graduation Plans (IGPs); credit accrual; instructional strategies; student achievement; expanded learning opportunities; early intervention; and community engagement.

Based on responses received from 219 campuses, strategies and activities implemented by the greatest number of campuses were direct instruction by highly qualified teachers (54%), credit recovery programs (48%), and activities that extend learning opportunities (42%). Strategies and activities implemented by the fewest number of campuses were trailer courses (10%), work study programs (10%), and mentoring programs (11%).

Respondents also indicated whether each allowable strategy and activity was new to the campus or a continuation of a previously funded program. The majority of strategies and activities implemented during Summer 2004 supplement programs which were already in place. Substantial percentages of grantees (i.e. greater than 45%) indicated that new strategies that are unique to the grant included the hiring of additional guidance counselors to assist with the development of IGPs, transportation for students receiving grant services, online diagnostic instruments for students, and highly qualified paraprofessionals or teacher assistants to assist teaching staff.

Although the majority of campuses reported implementing instruction by highly qualified teachers, more students took part in credit recovery programs or received high quality tutoring. Almost three quarters (71%) of the students in at-risk situations attending THSCS campuses utilized credit recovery programs, and 41% of the students in at-risk situations received high quality tutoring services.

These findings suggest that during Summer 2004, grantees focused on a few strategies and activities that support key components of the grant program, namely direct instruction by highly qualified teachers and the opportunity for students to accrue credits.

Implementation of Required THSCS Grant Components

The THSCS program requires grantees to implement certain programs and activities, including developing an IGP for each student on the campus, establishing programs that encourage students toward post-secondary education and training, and developing and implementing mentoring and work study programs with local businesses and community organizations. Detailed student-level information on the components described above will be addressed in reports that grantees submit following the Fall 2004 term. Results from the Fall 2004 and Spring 2004 THSCS progress reports will not be available until Summer 2005, but several items in the first progress report provide preliminary information on the number of students who participated in these services during Summer 2004.

Of the approximately 116,889 total students slated to receive services, over 45,300 students (40%) had an IGP in place by the end of Summer 2004. Of the students served during Summer 2004, a greater percentage, 59%, of at-risk students had an IGP in place than did others targeted by the grant. These findings suggest that grantees focused on developing and implementing IGPs for students in at-risk situations during Summer 2004.

In regard to activities designed to encourage students toward post-secondary education and training, grantees reported the number of students who took dual credit courses, Advanced Placement (AP)/International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, or participated in concurrent enrollment over the summer semester. Just under one third (31%) of the students served over Summer 2004 took an AP/IB course, and only three percent participated in concurrent enrollment.

Less than one percent of the students served over Summer 2004 participated in work study and mentoring programs. Of the participants in work study and mentoring activities, the majority were students in at-risk situations. By the end of the Summer term, a total of 411 mentors received training in working with students in at-risk situations.

It is strongly recommended that results related to services provided to students at THSCS campuses and strategies implemented by grantees be interpreted in terms of summer programs only and not the grant program in its entirety. The data presented in this interim report provide a descriptive account of how grant recipients are *beginning* to direct funds and serve students. Results for 2004-05 school year will reveal the full extent to which grant projects are serving students and implementing strategies and activities.

Conclusion

This first interim report shows that THSCS programs are targeting a population of students in need of intensive, accelerated academic services, as evidenced by the socio-economic/demographic status (e.g., economically disadvantaged status, at-risk status) and academic performance (e.g., 2004 TAKS results) comparisons to statewide benchmarks. Based on the comparative analysis of THSCS campuses and all high school campuses in Texas, it

appears as though the competitive grant process at TEA has effectively awarded THSCS grants to campuses in clear need of assistance.

THSCS campuses have begun to implement strategies and program activities consistent with the allowable uses of funds outlined in the Request for Applications (RFAs) issued by TEA. Some of the key services being provided by grantee campuses to students include the development of IGPs, credit accrual programs, high-quality tutoring programs, and college preparation activities, including AP/IB courses. The summer programs appeared to be weaker in the areas of work study and mentoring. Low participation rates in mentoring and work study may be a function of these programs being primarily regular school year programs. In addition, a significant number of mentors were trained during Summer 2004, which may result in increased participation of students during the 2004-05 school year.

It will be important to monitor the progress of these and other program activities as the THSCS campuses progress into the regular 2004-05 school year. In addition, it will be critical to determine what impact THSCS strategies and activities are having on key student achievement outcomes through a detailed analysis of disaggregated student-level data.