



Annual Implementation Report #1

Texas GEAR UP State Grant Evaluation

Executive Summary

September 30, 2013

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

Submitted by:
ICF International
9300 Lee Highway
Fairfax, VA 22031



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Executive Summary

In fiscal year 2012, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was awarded a federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant from the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). The broad purpose of the federal GEAR UP program is to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Through the Texas GEAR UP state grant (SG), participating schools are providing services to a cohort of students and their families from Grade 7 (2012–13 school year) through their first year of postsecondary education (2018–19 school year). Texas GEAR UP SG services are intended to impact teachers through the provision of professional development (PD) and schools/districts through changes in academic rigor. Finally, the Texas GEAR UP SG is intended to make a statewide impact through the widespread provision of coordinated information and resources for students and their families regarding postsecondary opportunities.

Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP SG

The evaluation of the Texas GEAR UP SG program is being conducted to examine implementation and outcomes, as well as the relationship between implementation and outcomes, and to identify potential best practices over the seven-year grant period. This first implementation report focuses primarily on formative feedback regarding early Year 1 implementation. Most outcome data are not yet available, limiting additional types of analyses. This report was informed by interviews with TEA and its partners on the grant, review of grantee action plans, GEAR UP federal annual performance reporting (APR) data, student and parent surveys, and qualitative site visit data.¹

Understanding the shortened period for Year 1 implementation is critical to interpreting the report findings. TEA first applied for the grant in July 2011 with plans for implementation to begin in the 2011–12 school year. Based on this application, USDE awarded the Texas GEAR UP SG in April 2012 during a second cycle of awards. TEA had experienced staffing changes during this period, and there were leadership changes at some of the districts and schools that had agreed to participate in the program when the application was first submitted. Ultimately, awards were made to the four districts participating in the Texas GEAR UP SG in October 2012.² Actual implementation did not begin at campuses until November/December 2012. In addition to beginning implementation in November/December 2012, APR data that is central to understanding implementation were collected in April 2013 but only reflected implementation through March 31, 2013. Additional data included in this report were collected through site visits to schools and surveys administered to students and parents in May 2013. Additional Texas GEAR UP SG Year 1 implementation activities will occur through summer 2013. In other words, the Texas GEAR UP SG had only been implemented for approximately six months before data collection was completed for this report. Readers are cautioned to keep this Year 1 implementation context in mind while forming ideas about the program based on the report.

Key Findings

Key findings to date presented here are organized as being related to implementation or as related to students' and parents' survey responses. Findings were also considered key if they

¹ TEA's partners on the Texas GEAR UP SG include the Texas GEAR UP Support Center staffed by personnel from The University of Texas at Austin's Institute for Public School Initiatives (UT-IPSI), TG (formerly Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation), the Texas Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (T-STEM) Centers, College Board, and AMS Pictures.

² The districts identified seven middle schools to participate in the program beginning in the 2012–13 school year. Schools are identified by letter in order to protect confidentiality.

were aligned to program goals set by TEA (see Appendix A). Interested readers are guided to the full report for additional information on all key findings. Overarching evaluation questions that are addressed in the report include the following:

- How was Texas GEAR UP SG implemented overall and at each of the participating schools?
- What were students, parents, teachers, and school staff perceptions of Texas GEAR UP SG implementation to date?
- What facilitators and barriers were associated with implementation of strategies?
- What practices implemented by grantees are perceived by grantees (students, parents, staff) to be effective, and therefore a potential best practice?
- What are students' and parents' levels of understanding regarding readiness (e.g., college aspirations/expectations, college options, being college ready at each grade level, financing college)?
- What are parents' levels of understanding regarding a range of topics linked to understanding college and career readiness (e.g., college expectations and aspirations, college options, being college ready at each grade level, financing college)?
- What information or opportunities do parents perceive to have been most relevant in informing them regarding college and career readiness?
- How did schools budget for Texas GEAR UP SG in Year 1?

Implementation

Key Takeaway:

Level and mix of implementation varied significantly across schools in the first six months of Year 1. School G appeared to have made the most progress on implementing the wide range of GEAR UP practices as designed/intended, although at least three schools (School B, School E, and School F) appeared to make excellent Year 1 progress at implementing a range of practices as well. The remaining three schools implemented a smaller range of activities.

The national GEAR UP program encourages grantees to engage in a wide range of implementation practices in order to support program goals, referred to here as mix of implementation. Table ES.1 provides a high-level overview of the range of implementation activities engaged in to any extent by the seven middle schools in the 2012–13 school year. There was a large amount of variation in the range of the number of implementation strategies implemented. While it is unclear at this point if any particular implementation activity or mix of implementation activities was or will be related to outcomes, School G clearly made the greatest progress toward implementing the wide range of practices intended in the short time period available and was the only school to provide counseling/advising and job site visit/job shadowing opportunities to students in Year 1.

Table ES.1. Overview of Implementation Strategies by School, 2012–13

Implementation Strategy	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F	School G
Advanced Course Enrollment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
SSS ^a : Tutoring	X ^b	X ^b	X ^b	X	X (mathematics only)	X (mathematics only)	X
SSS: Mentoring					X		X
SSS: Counseling/ Advising							X
SSS: Other Activities (After School Mathematics Program)					X	X	
College Visit	X	X		X			X
Job Site Visit/Job Shadowing							X
Student Workshops/ Events	X	X	X		X	X	X
Parent Events		X	X		X	X	X
Teacher PD ^c				X	X	X	X
Community Partners		X	X	X			X
Use Statewide Services					X	X	X
Total Number of Strategies Implemented	4	6	5	5	8	7	11

Source: Texas Education Agency, Texas GEAR UP SG Federal Annual Performance Report, April/May 2013 site visit data.

^a SSS=student support services. An additional SSS, financial advising, had not been implemented by any schools at the time of this report.

^b School A, School B and School C each indicated in the APR that students had participated in virtual tutoring relatively extensively. However, during the site visit, the actual level of tutoring was reported to be minimal. Still, given that tutoring had occurred to some extent, the schools were credited with having implemented tutoring.

^c PD= professional development. For this table, attendance at the national GEAR UP conference was not included in PD. All schools sent staff to the conference.

Texas GEAR UP SG has a Year 2 goal of at least 75% of Grade 8 students being involved in student support services (SSS), including comprehensive mentoring, counseling, and/or tutoring. Across all schools, 39% of Grade 7 students had been involved in these SSS in Year 1. However, School A, School B, and School C will all need to make significant adjustments in order to achieve this Year 2 goal. In Year 1, 34% of students or fewer were participating in SSS at these schools. At School D, School E, and School F, more than 75% of students were already engaged in SSS in Year 1, primarily through tutoring. At School E, almost all students (91%) were participating in both tutoring and mentoring. School G, while providing the broadest mix of SSS, had 66% of student participating in at least one SSS implementation activity in Year 1. It will need to make only small adjustments in Year 2 to achieve the goal. Tutoring occurs at School G although to a lesser extent than at several other schools. It is unclear if the differences in level of implementation across schools is related to school perceptions of which SSS may be helpful to students or if it differs due to a need for schools to develop better strategies to identify students requiring SSS or to increase their capacity to provide the services to students.

When mix of implementation includes workshops/events, family events, a college visit or other academic support, 81% of students across schools in Year 1 had participated in some Texas GEAR UP SG implementation activity. At School G, 34% of students had participated in three or more activities, and only 8% of students had not participated in any activity. At the other end

of the scale, School C lagged significantly in level of implementation—only 33% of students had participated in one activity and 3% in two activities, with the remaining 64% of students not participating in any activity at this point in Year 1.

ALGEBRA I: ADVANCED COURSE TAKING, TUTORING, AND ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

Key Takeaway:

While schools are focused on helping students to succeed in mathematics and, ultimately, to achieve Texas GEAR UP SG Algebra I goals, execution of plans for summer 2013 mathematics enrichment programs may be critical to helping schools achieve the Year 2 Algebra I goal.

Successful completion of Algebra I is a key early outcome, with goals of 30% of students by the end of Grade 8 and 85% of students by the end of Grade 9 expected to achieve this outcome. Participation in an advanced mathematics course in Grade 7 may indicate the potential for students to successfully complete Algebra I within these timeframes.³ Grade 7 students' enrollment in an advanced mathematics course averaged 22% and ranged from 18% (School G) to 29% (School D). Based on this, it is unclear if sufficient percentages of students will be prepared to successfully complete Algebra I in Grade 8. That is, student enrollment in advanced mathematics in Grade 7 fell below 30% at all schools and was well below this at two of the schools (School C and School F).

Tutoring efforts in Year 1 also emphasized mathematics tutoring, which is likely to support the Algebra I goals. Across schools, 47% of students were tutored in mathematics. As of March 31, 2013, the number of hours of tutoring in mathematics differed significantly by school. Average hours of mathematics tutoring exceeded 40 hours per participating student at two of the schools (School E and School F). School G provided significantly fewer hours of tutoring in mathematics (2.8 hours average per student) than all other schools. It is not known if any given school was implementing an appropriate number of hours of tutoring to support students or if some schools lacked capacity to increase the number of hours of tutoring to a level that might better support students. In addition to enrolling students in an advanced mathematics course and providing tutoring in mathematics, two schools (School E and School F) engaged in an afterschool mathematics enrichment program. All schools indicated in their spring 2013 site visits that they were planning summer 2013 mathematics enrichment programs.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WITH TEXAS GEAR UP SG

Key Takeaway:

Family engagement in Texas GEAR UP SG activities was low in Year 1 and no school achieved the goal of at least 50% of parents participating in at least three events as of March 31, 2013. The limited number of family events provided by schools and relatively low family attendance in those activities likely contributed to the low level of awareness of Texas GEAR UP SG expressed by parents and family members during evaluation site visits.

Across the seven schools, 12 family events were offered, with only 4.5% of Texas GEAR UP SG cohort families attending an event. While it did not count as participation in a family event,

³ Student enrollment in advanced courses in Grade 7 is considered baseline data as participating schools could not typically change student course placements in the middle of the school year when Texas GEAR UP SG programming began. Advanced courses are classes that are identified as above grade level by the student's school. Most honors and pre-Advanced Placement (AP) courses are considered advanced.

School G mailed all parents information regarding the Texas GEAR UP SG program and parent knowledge of the program was higher at this school than other schools. At School B, the school reported that 17% of parents participated in an event, the highest percentage at any school. School E and School F launched a three-part series of workshops for parents and families later in spring 2013 and noted that these events were successful, with higher numbers of parents attending the Texas GEAR UP SG family events than other meetings or events held at the school.⁴

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND VERTICAL TEAMING

Key Takeaway:

The November/December 2012 start of the Texas GEAR UP SG program likely contributed to low levels of program related teacher PD because schools had already planned teacher PD schedules before the beginning of the school year. School G was the primary exception, engaging in a broad range of teacher PD by May 2013. This included training on project based learning that occurred with a vertical team of teachers from the middle school and high school.

Most schools already had designed and scheduled their teacher PD activities for the 2012–13 school year prior to being awarded the Texas GEARUP SG and were not able to easily change plans. It may be that School G had already planned teacher PD that was easily aligned to Texas GEAR UP SG goals or that School G was better able to revise its planned teacher PD. Teachers who participated in focus groups expressed an interest in both PD on project based learning and pre-AP training for teachers. Teachers participating in focus groups at all schools also reported that few vertical teaming activities had occurred, although they indicated they valued such opportunities. During site visits, staff at all schools indicated plans for summer teacher PD related to Texas GEAR UP SG goals.

Student and Parent Surveys

Key Takeaway:

Across the range of information provided on the parent and student surveys, there were clear indicators that Texas GEAR UP SG could make a difference to the students and parents it serves. Both parents and students had aspirations that exceeded their educational expectations, suggesting that they are concerned about achieving education dreams. Few students or parents perceive themselves as very knowledgeable, which can potentially be changed by participation in Texas GEAR UP SG activities. Finally, there are multiple indicators that parents and students both need and want financial information as it relates to postsecondary education. With proper implementation of planned Texas GEAR UP SG activities, it is anticipated that students and families will gain knowledge and information about financial aspects of college and will view affordability as less of a barrier, increasing the likelihood that expectations and aspirations will be aligned.

Texas GEAR UP SG cohort students and parents were surveyed in spring 2013. In addition to learning about perceptions of Texas GEAR UP SG implementation, the surveys provided important information about educational aspirations and expectations, knowledge of college financial issues, and knowledge of college related concepts.

⁴ Detailed information regarding participation will be provided in future progress reports submitted by the schools and data will be presented in future reports.

EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

For both parents and students, educational aspirations were significantly higher than educational expectations. School G, where the implementation mix was the most broad, had the highest percentage of students who indicated that participating in Texas GEAR UP SG activities had positively influenced their decision to go to college (58%). That is, these students suggested that before Texas GEAR UP SG participation they were not committed to attending college but now expected to do so. Across schools, the greatest percentage of students who do not plan to go to college selected *concerns about cost* as a main reason for not continuing onto postsecondary education (48%).

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT COLLEGE

Texas GEAR UP SG has targeted an appropriate group of schools where the parents and students need additional information and support in order to become extremely knowledgeable about postsecondary education. Sixty percent of students indicated that they consider parents to be a key source of such information. Thus, supporting parents in gaining information may be critical. Across a range of college related terms (e.g., SAT, FAFSA), the majority of parents and students indicated they were either slightly knowledgeable or knowledgeable, with few indicating they were extremely knowledgeable. Additionally, nearly three-fourths of parents indicated they feel they do not have enough information about college entrance requirements, and a similar percentage indicated that no one from school or Texas GEAR UP SG had talked with them about these requirements.

FINANCIAL UNDERSTANDING OF COLLEGE

Perhaps one reason that parents and students were concerned about cost is that they tended to overestimate how much college will cost as compared to the actual state average. One in four parents and 12% of students indicated they have no knowledge about college financial aid. Parents on average considered themselves to be only slightly knowledgeable about financial terms. In the absence of knowledge, parents (69%) and students (93%) expressed at least some concern about being able to afford college.⁵ While Texas GEAR UP SG cannot impact the actual cost of college, it can provide parents and students with better information regarding actual costs and about financial supports to assist in paying for college, including scholarships and loans. In addition, since parents' fears are high but lower than students' fears, parents may need to be supported and guided to have frank conversations about financing college with their children.

PERCEPTION OF TEXAS GEAR UP SG ACTIVITIES

At School G, where the broadest range of implementation activities occurred, student overall satisfaction with Texas GEAR UP SG was highest, with 41% of students indicating they were very satisfied. While implementation appeared to be relatively high at School E and School F as well, less than 25% of students at these schools reported being very satisfied. This suggests that factors other than the range of implementation activities may impact satisfaction.

⁵ These percentages are of all parents/students responding to how sure they were that they could afford college. As noted, the main reason selected for not attending college by students who do not currently anticipate attending was cost.

Key Facilitators and Barriers: Implementation

Grant Coordinator Time Commitment and Support from Campus/District Administration

Key Takeaway:

The most salient difference between School G, where range of implementation activities was high, and the other schools, was the time commitment of the grant coordinators. School G was the only school with a coordinator who was located at the school and who had a 100% time commitment to implement the grant at the school. Coordinators who had other responsibilities or were responsible for implementation at more than one school appeared to be challenged to find the time to initiate such a broad range of new activities across such a broad range of stakeholders.

School G, where the greatest range of implementation activities occurred, was the only school to have a Texas GEAR UP SG coordinator who was located at the school and was committed 100% to implementing the project at that school. School E and School F, where implementation mix was also high, had a coordinator with a significant time commitment for Texas GEARUP SG. At the remaining four schools, all with lower levels of implementation, the coordinator was responsible for a range of other programs, and in some cases was responsible for implementation at more than one school, therefore having less time to commit to Texas GEAR UP SG. The grant coordinator's level of time commitment to single school implementation was the most obvious difference between the schools and explains in part the varying levels of implementation. In addition, at School E, School F, and School G there were more obvious signs of support from both campus and district administrators, further supporting the high level of implementation at these schools. At these three schools, office space that was centrally located at either the campus or district was provided to the coordinator and the coordinator was actively involved with other staff implementing programs.

Improved Academic Rigor

A potential barrier identified during site visits was concern about the need to improve academic rigor in advanced courses. Teachers at several schools who participated in focus groups noted that while they have students in advanced courses, the content was not as rigorous as needed to facilitate success. Schools have leeway in identifying a course as advanced by indicating it as Honors or pre-AP. If the course content is less rigorous than teachers who participated in focus groups thought it should be, it may be less likely that students in the advanced courses will ultimately be successful academically, particularly as they enter postsecondary education. It will be important to examine this perception of academic rigor over time as Texas GEAR UP SG is implemented.

Parents' Perceived Facilitators and Barriers

Key Takeaway:

Parents reported that engagement in activities is facilitated when topics are of interest to them, when events are held at times appropriate for their schedule, and when their student is also engaged.

Parents who responded to the survey indicated they were more likely to be engaged in family event activities held at the school when their students encouraged them to be engaged. This suggests that schools may benefit from working with students on involving parents, which can be difficult at the middle school level. Parents also identified picking a topic that was of interest to them as critical to their engagement in the activity. The greatest percentage of parents (49%) and students (28%) indicated college financing as a topic of interest. One-fifth of parents also

indicated they were interested in more information about the Texas GEAR UP SG program. Not surprisingly, parents most commonly identified time/schedule conflicts as a barrier to participation.

Other facilitators and barriers

Other facilitators to implementation included building on existing programs within the school, existing relationships with universities, and support from the Texas GEAR UP Support Center. Barriers included the need to increase the number of parent events and teacher professional development opportunities and increasing the receptivity of cohort schools/districts to opportunities provided by TEA partners.

Potential Promising Practices

While it is early in implementation (first six months) and any links between implementation and outcomes are not yet known, there were three activities about which a range of stakeholders were enthusiastic. Given the level of enthusiasm, the activities are suggested as potential promising practices for other schools to engage in and future examination of their impact is warranted. These activities are afterschool mathematics programs, enhanced college visits, and family events.

Afterschool Mathematics Programs

School E and School F had begun afterschool mathematics programs, targeting students who were expected to take Algebra I in Grade 8, if supported. The schools estimated that approximately 25% of students participated in the programs. Teachers at these schools who participated in focus groups indicated that the lessons used in the afterschool programs were often more challenging and more hands-on than in a typical mathematics class. In site visit focus groups, students who attended the program were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Facilitators identified as contributing to the programs' success included providing dinner and bus transportation home after the program.

Enhanced College Visits

School G tied classroom activities to college visits. For example, in one activity students researched colleges for a paper in English class. Students also wrote and decorated college brochures. Linking these visits to classroom practice may increase development of a college-going culture at the school.

Family Events

Family engagement was relatively low in Year 1, in part because schools had offered a relatively small number of family events during the brief six months of implementation reported on at the time of this report. During site visits, School E and School F reported success with a three-part series of family engagement workshops. The schools reported feeling successful at engaging parents in the series, as compared to previous experiences with engaging parents. The schools used flyers, personal calls from teachers, and "robo-calls" to build parent awareness and interest in the events. They provided free childcare to parents and Spanish translation for parents with limited English skills. The schools were optimistic that they could build on their successes in the future and attain the goal of 50% attendance at three events.

Recommendations/Next Steps

Based on the range of data that have been analyzed to date, several key recommendations or next steps with regard to program implementation in Year 2 can be made. These include the following:

- **Summer 2013 Implementation.** During spring 2013 site visits, all schools indicated that they would be implementing both summer mathematics enrichment programs (to support the Algebra I goal) and summer teacher PD. Summer 2013 implementation will be considered as Year 1 implementation. It is anticipated that successful summer implementation will be crucial to achieving success on Texas GEAR UP SG goals regarding Grade 8 student enrollment in Algebra I and teacher participation in PD. Concern was expressed during site visits that teacher PD may continue to present a challenge over the summer. Some schools indicated that planning for teacher PD in a given school year, including the summer, occurs at the start of the school year. Texas GEAR UP SG Year 1 implementation did not begin until November/December 2012, and changing the teacher PD plans even into summer 2013 was sometimes difficult. More generally, it is recommended that each school work on plans for Texas GEAR UP SG implementation in the upcoming year over each summer.
- **Year 2 Texas GEAR UP SG Outreach Activities.** Given the relatively low or uneven visibility of the program across stakeholders in Year 1 and given that some new students will join the school (and thus the Texas GEAR UP SG cohort), it is recommended that subrecipients be encouraged to consider engaging in additional “kickoff” type of activities at the start of the 2013–14 school year. These activities should include students, parents, teachers, and administrators.
- **SSS Decision Making.** The Texas GEAR UP SG encourages subrecipients to place students in SSS based on both teacher/counselor input and available data. Currently, only School G reported engaging in this practice. Going forward, all schools report that they are working on an early warning data system (EWDS), which will likely increase using data to drive decision making. Overall, it is recommended that schools revisit their decision making for providing SSS to students in order to facilitate the right students receiving the right supports as early as they can..
- **Increased Number, Timing and Content of Parent Events to Support Family Engagement.** To meet the goal of 50% of parents participating in at least three events each year, it is recommended that schools consider delivering more than three events or delivering one type of event at multiple times to facilitate parent attendance. In addition, parents reported that they are more likely to be engaged when the content aligns with areas where they have concerns. The most common focus across site visits and survey data would be for schools to consider family events that address the range of financial related topics—financial literacy, college costs, and scholarships. Those schools that have high percentages of parents who are limited English proficient (LEP) may want to consider engaging these parents by supporting their development of English skills, as at least some parents indicated an interest in such opportunities. Subrecipients are also encouraged to broaden their range of strategies used to recruit families.
- **College Preparation Advisors.** In Year 2, each school will have a College Preparation Advisor who has been trained in the Texas GEAR UP SG goals, school characteristics, student success strategies, and college access and readiness strategies. The College Preparation Advisor will be assigned to the school for 100% of her or his time. While grant coordinators will continue to lead in implementing the broad range of Texas GEAR UP SG activities, College Preparation Advisors will identify issues and be responsible for keeping students on track to graduate high school and be successful in college by providing individualized student support. It will be critical for schools to provide the College Preparation Advisors with appropriate and timely access to all the stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and provide them with timely and relevant data for them to succeed in their roles. To further support a college-going culture at the school, it is also hoped that schools will provide these College Preparation Advisors with a dedicated physical space for individual work with students.