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Prepared for the Texas Education Agency

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Executive Summary

This report on the evaluation of the Texas Principal Excellence Program (TxPEP) conducted by Learning Point Associates provides an overview of program content and organization during its first year of implementation (2007-08) and describes the overall evaluation design. The report then describes the methods used for collecting data during the 2007-08 program year and presents findings on participation in TxPEP events, program implementation and quality, and the impact of participation in TxPEP on principals, their schools, and students. The report concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the evaluation for assessing program impact and provides suggestions for conducting future evaluations of the program.

Overview of the TxPEP Program

In 2006, the 79th Texas Legislature, Third Special Session, passed House Bill 1 (HB 1), which includes a mandate to develop several school interventions for the purpose of improving educator excellence. HB 1 codified in Section 11.203, Texas Education code, permitted the use of up to \$3.6 million for the development of TxPEP and its first year of implementation. The purpose of TxPEP is to improve student academic achievement, graduation rates, and teacher retention by improving principals' leadership skills. The program is designed specifically to help principals learn sound business and management practices. Principals from campuses that received a rating of academically unacceptable (AU) for the first time in 2006–07 were required to participate in the 2007-08 TxPEP program; however, any principal or principal-in-training, regardless of AU status, was able to attend.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) contracted with the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) and its partners at the University of Houston–Victoria School of Business Administration to develop and implement TxPEP. The first year of the program was implemented between September 2007 and June 2008. During the first year, TxPEP participants were required to attend an initial and final summit meeting, three workshops, and five required webinars. Several optional webinars were also offered. Attendance at the summit meetings, the three workshops, and the five required webinars was mandatory for participants from AU campuses.

Key Evaluation Questions

The evaluation of 2007-08 TxPEP program includes both a formative component (focusing on program implementation and quality) and a summative component (focusing on program impact). The formative evaluation addresses the following questions regarding program participation, implementation, and quality:

- Who participated in TxPEP? (characteristics of participants' schools)
- Were TxPEP events well attended?
- Did TxPEP attendance patterns vary with principal and school characteristics (e.g., participants' years of experience as principal, campus rating, student-teacher ratio, percentages of minority students in the school)?

- Is the program being implemented with fidelity (i.e., as planned)?
- Is the program being implemented with high quality?
- Is the program content relevant to participants' needs and to their day-to-day work in schools?
- Is the program useful in helping participants develop leadership knowledge and skills? Do participants incorporate what they learn in their day-to-day work in schools?

The summative evaluation addresses the following questions regarding program impact:

- What is the impact of the TxPEP program on participants' leadership abilities?
- What impact do various amounts of program participation have on TxPEP participants' leadership abilities?
- What is the impact of principals' participation in TxPEP on school-level factors such as teacher retention?
- What impact do various amounts of program participation have on school-level factors?
- Does a change in principal leadership abilities lead to a change in any school-level factors?
- Does a change in principal leadership abilities lead to a change in any school-level factors that then lead to a change in student achievement or other student outcomes such as student attendance rates?

In addressing the formative questions, the following sources of data were used:

- TxPEP attendance data obtained from APQC
- Interviews with TEA and APQC program staff and cohort consultants (consultants provided guidance and support to 5 to 10 TxPEP participants assigned to each cohort group)
- A survey of cohort consultants
- Interviews and focus groups with principals participating in TxPEP
- Daily checklists/logs completed by TxPEP participants and principals from a matched comparison group
- Items on the usefulness of the TxPEP program that were included in the fall 2008 Principal Leadership Survey completed by TxPEP participants

In addressing the summative questions, the following sources data were used:

- The Principal Leadership Survey administered in fall 2007, spring 2008, and fall 2008 to TxPEP participants and comparison principals
- The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) and the 21st Century Principal Assessment administered in fall 2007 and spring 2008 to TxPEP participants by APQC

- A teacher survey administered in spring 2008 to teachers whose principals were either TxPEP participants or comparison principals
- Administrative data on principal, school, and student characteristics, including student performance on the 2007-08 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), obtained from TEA for TxPEP participants and comparison principals

Findings

This report highlights and expands upon the following findings regarding program participation, program implementation and quality, the relevance and utility of the program to principals' daily work in schools, and the relationship between program participation and growth in principals' leadership abilities and improvements in school performance and student performance over the period during which the 2007-08 program was implemented.

Program Participation

- A total of 306 principals from 291 schools participated in the 2007-08 TxPEP program.
- 81% ($n = 258$) of participants were from AU campuses; 19% ($n = 58$) were from non-AU campuses. The largest percentage of TxPEP participants were from elementary schools and suburban school districts, which is consistent with the distribution of schools and districts within the state.
- Program participation was initially high, but it declined over the course of the program.
 - Attendance rates at the initial summit meeting and the first three workshops were highest, with 84% or more of participants attending.
 - Attendance rates at required webinars were considerably lower, with approximately 60 to 70% of participants attending.
 - Optional webinars were not well attended. Between 15% and 30% of participants attended each of the optional webinars.
 - Only 28% of all participants attended all 10 required events; 23% attended 9 of the 10 events. A little over a quarter of participants (27%) attended five or fewer required events.
- Principals were more likely to participate in components of the program that were required and were less likely to follow through with components that were not required, such as implementing a professional development plan.

Program Implementation and Quality

- Interviews with TxPEP program staff suggest that the program was implemented with fidelity to stated program objectives. Principals who participated in interviews and focus groups reported that they found the program content to be of high quality, mostly relevant to their needs, and useful in helping them develop specific leadership skills and knowledge.

- Aspects of the program that participants found particularly useful were networking with other principals, working with experienced principals who served as consultants to the program, and having opportunities to reflect on their leadership practices.
- Participants also commented favorably on the format and topics of the webinars.
- Several participants noted that the webinars and workshop sessions on data use and data-driven decision making were useful in helping them understand how to use data to set school improvement goals.
- Interview and focus group participants generally agreed that they would prefer a greater emphasis on practical strategies that are relevant to their work in schools. Many found the program's emphasis on business and management models too removed from their responsibilities as principals.
- Participants generally agreed that they would prefer more options for selecting courses and webinars and noted that the program would be more useful and relevant if it were differentiated according to participants' needs and experience.

Relevance and Utility of TxPEP to Principals' Daily Work in Schools

- Analyses of daily checklists/logs completed by TxPEP participants and comparison principals in January/February, March/April, May, and September 2008 suggest that program participants found program content relevant to their responsibilities as principals and useful in their daily work.
 - On the checklists completed in January/February 2008, five months after the start of TxPEP, program participants were more likely than comparison principals to report spending more time on activities related to the leadership areas emphasized by the program. These initial differences between groups persisted over time.
 - On the January/February 2008 checklists, TxPEP participants were significantly less likely than comparison principals to report that they were *very effective* at providing strong leadership in the areas on which they spent time. However, the effectiveness self-ratings of TxPEP participants increased slightly over time while comparison principals' ratings remained stable.
 - For all leadership areas emphasized by the program, approximately 60% to 65% of the TxPEP participants who responded to the principal checklists reported that they were incorporating what they had learned into their daily work *to a moderate* or *to a great extent* on all four sets of checklists completed between January/February and September 2008.
- The vast majority of TxPEP participants (more than 80%) who responded to the fall 2008 Principal Leadership Survey ($n = 128$) reported that they had incorporated what they learned from the program in both their daily work and in their strategic planning *to a moderate* or *to a great extent*.

Program Impact on Principals' Leadership Abilities

- Analyses of TxPEP participants' and comparison principals' self-ratings of their leadership abilities over time suggest that TxPEP may have had a positive impact on participants' leadership abilities.
 - TxPEP participants' leadership scores increased significantly between the first and third administration of the principal survey for five of the six leadership areas measured. In contrast, the leadership scores of comparison principals remained relatively stable across survey administrations. However, these findings are based on self-report data rather than objective data on increases in TxPEP participants' leadership abilities, which limits inferences regarding program impact on participants' leadership abilities. In addition, response rates for the principal surveys used to obtain principals' leadership ratings declined over time, which could bias responses if systematic differences exist between survey respondents and nonrespondents.
 - Teacher ratings of TxPEP participants' leadership abilities were significantly higher for TxPEP participants who attended a high number of TxPEP events than they were for participants who attended a low number of events, suggesting that higher levels of program participation may have a greater impact on principals' leadership abilities than lower levels of program participation. However, alternative explanations for this finding cannot be ruled out. For example, principals with higher levels of program participation may be more motivated or dedicated than those with lower levels of participation which might account for the differences found in teachers' ratings.
 - Analyses of TxPEP participants' leadership ratings from the fall 2007 and spring 2008 LPI and 21st Century Principal Assessment revealed only slight increases for some of the leadership domains measured. In contrast to principals' ratings of their leadership abilities obtained from the Principal Leadership Surveys, both the LPI and 21st Century Principal Assessment provide general measures of leadership ability and do not specifically focus on the leadership areas emphasized by the program.

Program Impact on School and Student Performance

- No evidence was found of program impact on 2007-08 school performance indicators. These indicators were based on teacher and principal ratings of perceived improvements in teacher performance and satisfaction over the course of the 2007-08 school year. Administrative data on school-level outcomes of interest such as teacher retentions rates were not yet available from TEA and therefore could not be analyzed.
- No evidence was found of positive program impact on student performance on the 2007-08 TAKS and no substantial evidence was found of positive program impact on teacher or principal ratings of perceived improvements in student performance over the course of the 2007-08 school year.
- Although campus ratings improved between 2007 and 2008 for the majority of schools within the TxPEP participant sample, campus ratings vary substantially from year to year.

Given this variability, it would be difficult to attribute improvements in campus ratings to principals' participation in TxPEP.

Summary and Implications

The evaluation findings have several implications for both the future implementation of TxPEP and the assessment of program impact.

Barriers to Program Participation and Suggestions for Program Improvements

- Several barriers to program participation mentioned in participant interviews and focus groups are noted that may help to explain the decline in attendance rates over the course of the program (e.g., scheduled meetings and workshop that required participants to spend too much time away from their campuses; scheduling webinars at times that were inconvenient for participation; and participation in other school improvement initiatives that vied for participants' time). These barriers suggest the need for greater flexibility in the scheduling and format of TxPEP program offerings.
- Closer monitoring of program participation and completion of program requirements is suggested as another way to help ensure that participants are fulfilling program requirements.
- Participant feedback on aspects of the program that were not meeting their needs are noted, including difficulty in applying business management models and practices to educational contexts, participants' preference for greater options in selecting courses and webinars, and their desire for program offerings that are differentiated to accommodate participants' needs and experience.

Program Adjustments for the 2008-08 School Year

The following changes in the TxPEP program for the 2008–09 school year address most participants' suggestions for program improvements and may help to increase program participation:

- The program has been substantially reorganized to allow participants greater flexibility in selecting courses and webinars that address their individual needs and levels of experience; to provide coaching and support; to reduce barriers to program participation; and to relate business management models and practices to educational contexts.
- Provisions for closer monitoring of program participation and completion of program requirements have also been made.

Limitations of the Evaluation

There are several limitations to evaluation of TxPEP that make it difficult to draw causal inferences regarding the program's impact on participants, their schools, and students. The following limitations are noted:

- **Self-report data.** Analyses of changes in participants' leadership abilities and participants' implementation of program content are based on self-report measures,

which are subject to potential bias. Ideally, self-report measures should be supplemented with ratings from objective observers to better assess whether changes in principals' leadership abilities have actually occurred.

- **Response Rates.** Low response rates to principal and teacher surveys and principal checklists introduce another source of potential bias to survey and checklist responses.
- **Alternative Explanations.** While the evaluation findings suggest that TxPEP participants' leadership abilities increased over the course of their participation in the program and that teachers' ratings of principal leadership were higher for participants with high levels of program participation, there are plausible alternative explanations for these findings.
- **Time Frame of Evaluation.** There are several limitations to the evaluation of program impact on schools and students related to the short time frame between program implementation and program outcomes.
 - Administrative data were not yet available on several school- and student-level outcomes of interest such as teacher retention rates and student promotion and graduation rates. Although teachers and principals were asked to indicate whether improvements in these school- and student-level indicators had occurred, perception data are less reliable than administrative data for assessing improvement.
 - While 2007-08 student TAKS data were available for analysis, the data were obtained in March 2007 at which time TxPEP participants would have experienced at most seven months of the program. It is unlikely that the program would have had any impact on student achievement after so short a period of time.

Recommendations for Future Evaluations

One explanation for the failure to detect program effects at the school level may be that better measures are needed of school-level implementation and short-term outcomes. To determine whether the program is having an impact on schools and teachers during early stages of implementation, data are needed related to what school improvement goals participants are trying to achieve, what aspects of the program they are implementing to achieve them, and how successful they are with implementation.

Program requirements regarding participants' implementation of program content also need to be clarified so that appropriate measures of school-level implementation can be developed. Although participants in the 2007-08 TxPEP program were expected to implement an individual professional development plan, findings from interviews with program staff suggest that many participants did not implement a plan. For the 2008-09 TxPEP program, participants are required to implement a professional development plan, and learning coaches will be responsible for monitoring implementation. TEA might consider asking learning coaches to complete a formal assessment for each participant to provide data on participants' progress in implementing their professional development plans.

TEA might also consider collecting additional data from participants in the 2007-08 TxPEP program to determine whether they are applying (or continuing to apply) information or

strategies learned from the program. School and student outcome data (e.g., teacher retention rates, student graduation/promotion rates, and student performance on the TAKS) might also be collected and analyzed over time to determine whether improvements occur on these indicators at schools led by principals who participate in the TxPEP program.

Recommendations Regarding Program Sustainability

Several of the changes to the TxPEP program for the 2008-09 school year are aligned with recommendations for professional development programs for principals. However, as yet there appear to be no plans to follow up with participants after they have completed the program or to extend participation in learning networks beyond the nine-month period of the program. Encouraging program participants to continue to participate in these learning networks may help to ensure the sustainability of program objectives beyond the period of formal program participation.