

# Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

## Annual Implementation Report

### Evaluation of Year 3

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## Executive Summary

Now in its third year of program implementation, the Texas Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): Beyond Grad program (referred to as “GEAR UP” in this report) made important progress during the 2020–21 school year to support college and career readiness for students from low-income schools in Texas.

## Program Overview

GEAR UP provides targeted services to a grade-specific primary cohort of students who were in Grade 7 during the 2018–19 school year (i.e., the **class of 2024**) through their first year of postsecondary education (i.e., through the 2024–25 academic year). GEAR UP also provides basic services to a **priority cohort** of students consisting of all other students in Grade 9–12 attending participating high schools in the grantee districts during each year of the 7-year grant (i.e., from school years 2018–19 to 2024–25). The core strategies conceptualized in GEAR UP to close the college achievement gap include increasing academic rigor, preparing middle school students, expanding college and career advising and resources for high school students, leveraging technology to expand advising capacity, and developing local alliances (the full description of GEAR UP strategies is listed in Appendix A).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is working with participating districts to make a range of programs and services aligned with these core strategies available to class of 2024 and priority cohort students, such as comprehensive individualized college and career counseling, college visits, and opportunities to participate in an academic enrichment or college exploration summer program. Parents/guardians of class of 2024 and priority cohort students also have access to individualized college and career counseling and a variety of parent workshops/events. In addition, teachers and personnel at GEAR UP campuses have access to professional development (PD) to improve academic rigor and college and career counseling services.

TEA has partnered with three non-profit organizations—CFES Brilliant Pathways, Advise TX, and College Advising Corps (CAC)—to implement college and career counseling/advising services at the high school level.<sup>1</sup> Each organization is serving two districts and providing at least one full-time advisor to serve each GEAR UP high school. TEA has also partnered with TNTP to implement various PD components of the grant.<sup>2</sup> Finally, TEA has partnered with Texas OnCourse (TXOC) to develop curricula, including the Texas OnCourse College and Career Readiness (TXOC CCR) curriculum for middle school students as well as the new TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program (TXOC Academy).

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<sup>1</sup> Founded initially as College For Every Student, the organization changed its name in 2018 to CFES Brilliant Pathways to better reflect its expanded mission to support students in both college and career. For more information, please visit <https://brilliantpathways.org/faq-items/what-does-cfes-stand-for/>.

<sup>2</sup> Founded originally as the New Teacher Project (TNTP) in 1997, TNTP is an organization that helps educators improve effectiveness in classroom teaching: <https://tntp.org/>. The organization changed its name to simply TNTP after its mission expanded beyond only serving new teachers.

## Evaluation of Texas GEAR UP: Beyond Grad

This report presents findings from the implementation study during the third year—school year 2020–21 (Year 3)—when the class of 2024 students were in Grade 9 and the priority cohort students were in Grade 10–12. Findings were derived from data collected via stakeholder surveys, virtual site visits, and telephone interviews (see Appendix B for full methodological details). The report highlights how GEAR UP is being implemented, promising practices, how the program is being sustained and what activities should be sustained, and how program activities are being scaled across the state (see Appendix B for the list of evaluation questions used to guide the implementation study).

There are some limitations regarding the Annual Implementation Report for Year 3. Given the varied challenges with school operations as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic—along with shifting priorities for students, parents, and personnel—survey response rates and virtual focus group participation levels were lower than expected. Further, the data for this report were collected in March and April 2021, whereas Year 3 implementation continued on through the end of the school year. Therefore, the implementation findings provided in this report only represent part of the school year (summer 2020 through March/April 2021), rather than the full year. Ultimately, because of these factors, the findings shared in this report must be interpreted with caution.

### Key Findings

- ▶ **Academic preparedness among students.** Class of 2024 students who indicated that they were enrolled in Algebra I in Year 3 (as Grade 9 students) generally agreed that they were prepared for the course but were also less likely to agree that the course was challenging. Additionally, principals from Districts 2 and 5 reported that dual credit enrollment has continued to increase due to partnerships with local community colleges and increased Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) testing.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ **Tutoring opportunities offered to students.** GEAR UP continued to offer the necessary academic support for students with a failing grade in Year 3, with students reporting that they received tutoring across several subjects and in different formats such as in class and after school. While GEAR UP coordinators cited the use of virtual tutoring as a means to minimize interactions during COVID-19, they also found it difficult to implement. A majority of student survey respondents who participated in tutoring found it to be helpful.
- ▶ **Test preparation support.** Other academic support in Year 3 included preparation for college entrance examinations, with students reporting that they agreed that they knew where to find Preliminary SAT (PSAT)/SAT, ACT/ACT Aspire, and TSIA preparation resources, which increased significantly from Year 2 to Year 3.<sup>4</sup> Among all priority cohort students who reported in the student survey that they completed any test preparation, nearly

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<sup>3</sup> To protect the anonymity of school districts and personnel, districts are not referred to by name but according to a randomly generated number that serves as a pseudonym (e.g., District 1, District 2).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this report, “significance” refers to findings that were determined to be statistically significant through the use of statistical tests.

three-quarters believed that the test preparation they received helped them to prepare for the test.

- ▶ **Advising services.** In Year 3, non-profit GEAR UP advisors began working with class of 2024 students and continued working with priority cohort students using in-person and virtual advising services and spaces to offer college and career information. Zoom meetings, newsletters, and texting were used to disseminate information and provide advising. Student survey respondents reported that college plans, grades, and career plans or interests were the most frequently discussed topics in individualized advising sessions, with parents indicating that their child's course selection and scheduling, child's grades, and dual credit opportunities were the most discussed topics in the parent individualized advising sessions.
- ▶ **College and career readiness activities.** College visits, college and career fairs, and work-based learning activities were offered in addition to advising in Year 3. With most of these activities being offered virtually, both cohorts reported in the survey that college visits consisted mostly of virtual campus tours and virtual speaker sessions. According to GEAR UP coordinators, work-based learning activities included meetings with local businesses to understand ideal candidate types, mock interviews with local bank employees, and virtual learning sessions. Students were generally *Satisfied* with college visits, college and career fairs, and work-based learning activities.
- ▶ **Parent activities.** According to the class of 2024 parent survey respondents, parent events hosted by GEAR UP schools included topics on college and career advising, high school course alignment with certain careers, and different college options. Priority cohort parents noted more event topics on types of colleges, academic requirements for college, and options to take high school courses aligned with certain careers. Nearly half of parents who did not attend a parent or family event reported they did not know about it.
- ▶ **Student and parent awareness.** Despite the information disseminated via advising sessions and other GEAR UP activities, student and parent site visit participants and survey respondents across the districts mentioned low awareness of postsecondary education financing items.
- ▶ **PD and vertical teaming initiatives.** GEAR UP offered several PD initiatives in Year 3, including TNTP-led teacher and administrator PD to enhance academic rigor, coaching and mentoring, the TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program, and vertical teaming. A noted challenge with PD in Year 3 was that substitute teachers were not available to provide coverage for personnel participating in PD activities. Personnel agreement levels decreased from Year 2 to Year 3 regarding how PD-provided strategies increased rigor in their courses and how easy those strategies were to implement. Of those that participated in at least one coaching session, the most discussed topics included student engagement, virtual or distance-based learning, and academic supports for students. Counselors and other school staff participated in a 31-module self-paced TXOC Academy in Year 3 to learn about a range of postsecondary advising topics, with most agreeing that they learned new information about postsecondary education and feeling being better prepared to deliver individualized advising. Vertical teaming participants also agreed that the vertical teaming they participated in was helpful in aligning curriculum.
- ▶ **Sustainability initiatives.** All six GEAR UP districts sustained the TXOC CCR curriculum for Grade 8 students, with one coordinator noting its helpfulness to expose younger students

to college and career topics. Four of the six districts continued to enroll Grade 8 students in Algebra I, with some districts increasing the number of sections of the course. One district added a summer bridge program to remediate rising Grade 9 students who had not been successful in Algebra I in Grade 8.

- ▶ **GEAR UP feedback and scaling initiatives.** In Year 3, TXOC added nine new districts to the TXOC CCR curriculum scaling initiative for a total of 18 districts piloting the curriculum in Year 3. Teachers who implemented the TXOC CCR in GEAR UP schools felt that the curriculum was ready to be scaled more widely though recommended that more training be developed for teachers. While district scaling survey respondents *Agreed* that the curriculum provided students information on college and financial aid options, they reported lower levels of agreement that the curriculum offered grade-appropriate materials.
- ▶ **Grant implementation support.** The implementation of GEAR UP was viewed positively in Year 3, with high school principals reporting they felt GEAR UP goals aligned with campus goals and that the integration between the two was mutually beneficial. Many personnel, students, and parents were unfamiliar with GEAR UP services and activities in Year 3, however, as well as how college and career information was disseminated. Progress-monitoring meetings and coordinator professional learning communities (PLCs) in Year 3 were facilitated by TNTP, which offered coordinators and other school and district personnel opportunities to reflect on grant implementation progress and allowed for collaborative brainstorming. TEA staff explained that the change in divisions in which GEAR UP is housed at TEA as well as their strong communication with districts about their local needs also served to strengthen implementation in Year 3.

## Promising Practices

Promising practices include innovative practices or strategies described anecdotally by grant stakeholders as successful. While stakeholders perceived these promising practices as facilitators to successful implementation, the evaluation team has not independently assessed whether the promising practices are associated with improved grant outcomes. The promising practices identified in Year 3 are as follows:

- ▶ **Mentor high school dual credit students with college students who are alumni.** The District 4 coordinator reported that alumni from their high school mentored a group of 15 dual credit students and other Grade 10 students to help inform them of dual credit programs and other college and career information. According to the coordinator, mentors would call and text, and ultimately helped increase the number of students and parents who had access to the information.
- ▶ **Provide monthly student and parent newsletters dedicated to college and career readiness.** A non-profit advising organization reported that in Year 3 online monthly newsletters were provided to students and parents with information regarding what the recipient should be focusing on that month. According to a non-profit advisor, the main difference between the student and parent newsletters was that the parent newsletter had a section with questions parents were encouraged to ask their child that month.
- ▶ **Use a virtual college visit program to increase exposure.** The District 1 coordinator noted that an online software program offered students and parents access to virtual college visits. One of the benefits of the online program is that it provides the district with the ability

to highlight the universities they wish to expose students to, while allowing students and parents to access them on their own time anywhere. According to the District 1 coordinator, the online program will be used next year even when the district returns to in-person instruction.

- ▶ **Establish a dedicated work-based learning coordinator.** The District 4 coordinator described that work-based learning opportunities offered to students in Year 3 were not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the support offered by their work-based learning coordinator and their efforts to maintain a relationship with local businesses.
- ▶ **Implement innovative parent events to increase engagement.** According to the District 4 coordinator, during one of the district’s “progress meetings” the district developed and ultimately implemented an idea for how to boost parent engagement, the “Chat & Chew,” saying that students and parents would receive dinner if they came to speak to an advisor about various college and career topics.
- ▶ **Invite former students to participate in vertical teaming.** The District 4 GEAR UP coordinator mentioned that a panel of former students participated in one of the district’s vertical teaming sessions to provide insight on their high school experience and suggest improvements for teachers. The coordinator explained that the former students “were able to talk to [the] teachers about some of the things that they wished were a little bit different, and how the teacher could improve.”
- ▶ **Sustain efforts to increase Algebra I enrollment rates among Grade 8 students.** A high school principal in District 3 cited their middle school’s progress in sustaining increased Grade 8 enrollment in Algebra I, as well as broader remediation efforts initiated at the high school to support any students who need additional support. The principal described the use of a summer bridge program and additional support at high school once students arrive for Grade 9. According to the principal, these efforts have supported increased Algebra I enrollment in Grade 8: “It’s the largest amount of [students] ever taking Algebra I, ever.”
- ▶ **Invite guest speakers to supplement the TXOC CCR curriculum and increase exposure to postsecondary education and career options.** TXOC CCR teachers from District 3 highlighted that one of the key successes of the course was the use of guest speakers, which sometimes included teachers from the high school who also held other careers. TXOC CCR teachers suggested that district administrators facilitate partnerships with local colleges, whose staff/students could additionally serve as guest speakers.
- ▶ **Support districts in the use of data to understand progress and drive implementation.** TEA, TNTP, and most district coordinators reported that they were satisfied with the Year 3 progress-monitoring meetings. Grant staff reflected on the data they collected for GEAR UP during these meetings, identified gaps in progress and successful areas of implementation, and developed strategic action plans to address challenges. Districts should consider continuing to monitor their grant data to understand their progress in implementation in a style that fits well for them as a whole, which may help tailor the services to meet the needs of their students and school communities.
- ▶ **Establish monthly communications to share program-wide updates, upcoming activities, and deadlines.** One of the ways that TEA staff strengthened their communication with districts about GEAR UP was through a monthly communique which highlighted upcoming activities and deadlines. This method helped GEAR UP coordinators

remain informed of important dates and events as their districts remained focused on academics and instruction.

## Recommendations

In addition, the evaluation team identified the following recommendations for TEA to consider in future grant implementation and implementation of similar programming outside of GEAR UP:

- ▶ **Reprioritize GEAR UP goals in Year 4.** While many schools were focused on transitioning to virtual instruction and maintaining student attendance and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in Year 3, school and GEAR UP personnel have the opportunity to reprioritize GEAR UP goals in Year 4 that were difficult to achieve this year. Feedback from students and staff indicated that they preferred to participate in meetings and class while in person instead of virtually. As it is safe to do so, GEAR UP staff should consider how to engage with stakeholders in person. When it may not yet be safe to meet in person, GEAR UP coordinators may consider collecting feedback on other innovative ways to meet and increase engagement in a virtual setting.
- ▶ **Ensure recommendations made by external partners, such as TNTP, take state and local context into consideration.** Some school and GEAR UP personnel commented in site visits that TNTP did not always provide relevant or applicable recommendations, noting specifically that vertical alignment recommendations made by TNTP did not align with the needs of the district or that TNTP suggestions were not provided through the lens of a Texas context. As external organizations provide recommendations and support implementation in GEAR UP districts, they may increase buy-in if they frame ideas and suggestions in state and local contexts to demonstrate their understanding of how they are tailored to fit specific student and school needs.
- ▶ **Provide more opportunities for students to participate in practice PSAT, SAT, ACT, or TSIA exams.** Student site visit participants recommended their school provide them with practice tests to help them become more prepared for college entrance exams. Students commented that they either did not participate in any test preparation activities or did not receive test preparation resources to prepare them for the content of the exams or the types of questions to expect.
- ▶ **Align college and career communication topics and timing with the interests and values of students and parents.** Understanding that not all parents have interest in college or career information, it may be helpful for coordinators and non-profit advisors to consider strategies for tailoring communications to better resonate with student and family values and address any historical or cultural sentiments towards postsecondary education among community members. Tailoring the communications to specific grade levels of students may be another way to enhance the relevance of messages. Tailoring communication to students and families may help generate interest and better prepare them for postsecondary education, while preventing them from becoming overwhelmed.
- ▶ **Increase student and parent awareness of financial aid topics through one-on-one advising and enhanced information dissemination.** Student and parent survey responses point to a lack of understanding regarding available financial aid topics as well as limited events in which they received information regarding how to pay for postsecondary education, which may serve as barriers in the pursuit of postsecondary education. Non-profit

advisors and high school counselors may consider incorporating these topics in a grade-appropriate manner in one-on-one advising sessions, other activities and events, and information dissemination efforts to help increase student and parent awareness and understanding of options to fund college.

- ▶ **Use data to inform how successful GEAR UP services and activities may be sustained.** Progress-monitoring meetings were well received by TEA and most coordinators in Year 3. Looking ahead to Year 4, TNTF, TEA, and GEAR UP coordinators may find it helpful to build time into these meetings to reflect on successful GEAR UP activities and services that should be sustained. As some district and school administrators also attend these progress-monitoring meetings, this may be an ideal time to provide data-driven recommendations regarding services to those who will oversee the implementation and funding after the completion of the grant.
- ▶ **Address technical issues in the TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program.** Some TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program participants reported that they experienced technical issues in the online module. TXOC may consider addressing these issues as the academy is accessed by other districts across Texas.
- ▶ **Offer parent events at flexible times in various formats.** Parents continued to suggest for schools to host parent events at multiple times to accommodate varying work schedules, family schedules, and COVID-19 concerns. Feedback from school personnel and GEAR UP coordinators suggest schools may consider offering sessions both in person and virtually (such as Zoom meetings, conference calls, etc.) to increase the opportunities for parents to attend meetings and events. Schools may also consider recording events for parents to view if they were not able to attend the live event.
- ▶ **Host PD events or trainings at times that cause minimal disruption.** Personnel and TXOC Academy participants reported in the survey and site visits that PD events and trainings (such as the TXOC Academy) were not always conducive to staff schedules and availability. Participants suggested that the summer or before school would be ideal times to complete the TXOC Academy Counselor and Advisor Program modules in a timely manner instead of at the beginning of the school year, which is when participants reported they were required to participate. Those at TXOC and in schools that schedule such PD events may consider times that align with the workflow of school staff to ensure participants have adequate availability and time to participate fully.
- ▶ **Build awareness of GEAR UP-supported services and activities with a sustainability lens.** Districts are encouraged to think strategically and intentionally about how to name and brand their GEAR UP-supported college and career readiness programming with a sustainability lens in mind. That is, districts should consider how they want students, parents, and school personnel to recognize college and career programming after the grant ends and build out their naming/branding strategy accordingly. It is recommended that districts strategically embed GEAR UP-supported services into structures that exist within their districts. Ultimately, the external evaluation team will also need to adjust site visit and survey instruments to ensure that the team is asking questions about awareness of GEAR UP and/or college and career programming that reflect the intended naming/branding strategy for that programming.