

Texas High School Completion and Success Grant, Cycle 2



*Program Evaluation
Final Report*

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SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL
SEDL
DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY

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A FINAL PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT OF THE

Texas High School Completion and Success Grant, Cycle 2

FOR THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY

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A. Executive Summary

During the regular legislative session of 2003, the State of Texas authorized funding for high school completion and success initiatives. The Texas High School Completion and Success (THSCS) Grant Program was created as an innovative strategy to improve high school completion rates. The program was designed to target under-performing high schools and high schools with low completion rates through competitive grants. Cycle 2 of the THSCS Grant included awards to 106 school districts and open enrollment charter schools. Programs were implemented at 173 campuses within these school systems. Funding for Cycle 2 started in October 2004 and ended in February 2007. Amounts awarded to school districts ranged from \$15,000 to \$600,000.

This report presents an evaluation of the THSCS, Cycle 2 Grant program and makes recommendations to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that may benefit this and other state-level programs. The following objectives for the evaluation project were defined by TEA:

- To assess the quality of the THSCS, Cycle 2 Grant programs implemented at grantee campuses and their impact on student achievement results.
- To document observed changes at THSCS, Cycle 2 grantee campuses between the spring 2005 and spring 2006 site visits, and complete a cross-site analysis of programmatic successes (activities that were successful in improving student achievement) and failures (activities that failed to significantly affect graduation rates and student achievement).
- To determine how the grant program has affected the attitudes and culture of the campuses where the project was implemented.
- To determine best practices for improving student achievement and increasing graduation rates observed at sampled THSCS, Cycle 2 grantee campuses and create case studies of each of the sampled campuses.
- To determine if participation in the THSCS, Cycle 2 Grant program resulted in better student achievement outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, grade retention rates, and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [TAKS] passing rates) for Cycle 2 grantees than for similar unfunded campuses.
- To determine which activities and strategies, or combinations of activities and strategies, seemed to have the most profound impact on the various student achievement outcomes.

TEA selected Gibson Consulting Group, Inc. (Gibson) and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratories (SEDL) to conduct this evaluation. The work began in March 2005 and was completed in August 2007, and evaluated two years of program activity.

An interim report on the Cycle 2 evaluation was provided to TEA in February 2007. Since the interim report, additional analysis has been conducted and the evaluation has been updated. This final report presents findings, conclusions and recommendations for the entire study, but does not replicate the detailed work contained in the interim report. A separate, final report on the sustainability of THSCS, Cycle 1 grant activities was also previously provided to TEA.

The Cycle 2 program evaluation methodology included two surveys, 34 site visits, statistical analyses, and a cost analysis. To support an analysis of effective strategies, the evaluation team identified campus

and student intervention categories based on the types of services provided by schools. These categories were not defined at the inception of the grant program because TEA wanted to provide schools with maximum flexibility in implementing innovative strategies to improve high school completion. Student interventions such as tutoring or credit accrual classes involved direct services to students. Campus interventions, such as the addition of counselors and parent involvement programs, served to improve high school completion through more indirect means. The statistical analysis of the program impact on student achievement was performed at both the campus and student level.

The major findings from this evaluation are summarized below:

- Based on survey results, factors that facilitated successful intervention implementation included having district support, strong school leadership, school staff buy-in and collaboration, and an alignment of interventions with other school activities and priorities. Lack of time for planning was the most significant constraint cited by school and program administrators. Survey results from the 2006 administration generally reinforced the 2005 administration results.
- Implementation strategies applied by schools through this grant program were found to be aligned with current literature and research on best practices for improving high school completion. Further, there were several school-level and intervention-level effective practices that influenced successful programs. School-level promising practices included school and program leadership qualities, alignment with other campus programs, data-driven decision-making, and the existence of high expectations. At the intervention level, flexible activity options, individualized attention, the use of technological learning tools, and exposure to college environments were recognized as best practices.
- Though improvements in TAKS and on attendance rates did not emerge among THSCS campuses, program participation did seem to be related to grade advancement. Specifically, THSCS students had a slightly higher 2005-06 promotion rate than comparison-group students (93.4 percent versus 92.3 percent). About 88 percent of both THSCS- and comparison-group students were on-track to graduate from high school within four years.
- Overall, more than two-thirds of grantees indicated that their interventions were making a significant difference in their schools. Perceived student outcomes most associated with grant interventions were increased student motivation, improved TAKS performance, credit accrual/recovery, and increases in graduation rates.
- Overall, improved student performance at THSCS campuses was not observed on TAKS or attendance outcomes. Specifically,
 - Campus-level analyses investigating differences between THSCS schools and well-matched comparison schools detected no statistically significant differences on the 2006 TAKS reading and mathematics assessments (as measured by passing rates), or on student attendance rates.
 - Looking at individual student scores, there was also no difference detected on the TAKS reading or mathematics assessments between Cohort 1 students (those attending THSCS campuses for 9th and 10th grade from 2004-05 to 2005-06) and their matched comparison-group students, or between Cohort 2 (those attending THSCS campuses for 9th grade in 2005-06) and their matched comparison group, on the reading assessment. Cohort 2

comparison-group students had a slightly higher and statistically significant TAKS mathematics scale score than THSCS students.

- In Cohort 1, comparison-group students had significantly higher 2005-06 school attendance rates than THSCS students. There were no differences in attendance rates among Cohort 2 were students.
- Approximately one-half of grant related expenditures were for personnel resources, such as supplemental teacher pay and substitute costs. Other significant uses of funds included software costs and teaching supplies. Software costs related primarily to instructional software used in connection with credit recovery and/or accelerated instruction interventions. Schools showing greater improvement in student achievement tended to spend more on personnel than other schools; however, the difference was not materially significant.
- The lack of service definition precluded the ability to analyze expenditures at the intervention level on a per student headcount or per full-time-student equivalent (FTE) basis. Grantees stated that they are willing and able to track expenditures at lower levels if they are provided the instructions prior to the inception of the program.

The THSCS, Cycle 2 Grant achieved many of the goals established for the program. While the perceived impact on student performance was greater than the statistically proven impact, the collective research shows that this program contributed to the improvement of initiatives supporting increased high school completion and student success through the development of a variety of successful campus and student level interventions. Student benefits may accumulate over time.

Gibson and SEDL wish to express their thanks to the school and district staff who participated in this program evaluation, as well as TEA research staff.

Link to full report:

http://www.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/HighSchoolCollege/thscs_c2_evaluation.pdf