Addendum to the Charter School Program Grant Implementation Report, 2021–22 and 2022–23

Prepared by McREL International and Gibson Consulting Group, Inc. for the Texas Education Agency

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Glossary of Acronyms

CSP = Charter School Program

EB/EL = Emergent Bilingual Students/English Learners

IB = International Baccalaureate

ISD = Independent School District

NOGA = Notice of Grant Award

TEA = Texas Education Agency

TEC = Texas Education Code

STEAM = Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math

<div style="background-color:#5a6329; color:white; text-align:center; font-weight:bold; padding:5px;">Findings Highlights</div>

Planning for the establishment of a new charter school campus is a multifaceted process of determining community fit, alignment to the mission and vision of the organization, and a desire to engage and serve students in new ways.

Across the grantees, the process for deciding to open a new charter school campus involved several individuals or groups including organizational leaders, board members, external partners, consultants, and committees of parents/guardians, students and staff. A critical part of the process of deciding to open a new campus was ensuring there was a good fit between the organizing mission and vision and the needs and desires of the community within which the charter school campus would operate. The decision to open a new charter school campus often reflected a desire to accomplish something specific in the community like engaging students in new ways through innovative programming, offering advanced college preparatory programs, enhancing young women's leadership capacities through academies, or providing programming to meet the needs of students with unique learning needs (e.g., students who qualified for special education programs).

The Charter School Program (CSP) grant was greatly valued and appreciated by recipients as one source of funding to establish a new charter school campus.

CSP grantees expressed gratitude for the additional funds to help establish their charter school campuses; however, it was clear that the CSP grant was just one of many funding sources needed to establish the campus. Other common sources of funding included local, state, and federal funding, and grants from philanthropic organizations and foundations. Even with the CSP grant and other funding sources, grantees communicated the sense that there is never quite enough money to do all the things they would like to do for students and staff, including paying competitive staff salaries, hiring more staff to provide services for students who qualify for special education or emergent bilingual students/English learners (EB/EL) services, and hiring staff for particular educational programs, like International Baccalaureate (IB).

As the Texas Education Agency (TEA) facilitates grants like CSP, they should continue their focus on providing excellent communication and support and strive to assist grant recipients through timely negotiations and awards of funding.

Interviewees spoke very highly of the helpfulness, responsiveness, and supportiveness of the TEA Division of Authorizing team and expressed their appreciation for the CSP grant which helped them establish their new charter school campuses, expand to serve new students, or to extend their mission into new communities. However, grantees also communicated some concerns about the timing and timeliness of grant negotiations and funding. Several participants noted that there had been delays in receiving their CSP funding relative to the planned date for opening of their school, which lead to challenges purchasing some needed items and contracting services for staff training. Charter school campuses that experienced funding delays would have liked more time to spend the grant funds.

Introduction

This report is an addendum to the Charter School Program (CSP) Grant Implementation Report, 2021–22 and 2022–23 which describes the first two cohorts of CSP grantees' progress establishing new charter school campuses.[1] The addendum summarizes the results of supplemental interviews with grantee finance and operations staff.

The purposes of these supplemental interviews included:

- To add district or charter organization staff perspective on how the CSP grant was used,
- To learn more about the processes involved in deciding to open a new campus,
- To learn more about the variety of funding sources districts and charter organizations rely on to open a new campus,
- To learn more about the ways in which CSP grant funds were used to establish the campus,
- To learn more about the role of fundraising to launch and sustain new charter school campuses,
- To better understand unmet needs after receiving the grant, and
- To gather feedback about communication and support from the Division of Authorizing at the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Background

The CSP Grant Implementation Report, 2021–22 and 2022–23 covered three primary sources of information: CSP grant applications, CSP principal surveys, and CSP principal interviews.[1] Although these data sources provided detailed information about the establishment of new charter school campuses, preliminary qualitative analyses showed that principals often had a difficult time answering questions about how CSP grant funds were used to accomplish strategic objectives at their campuses (e.g., to create a positive school culture). The study team hypothesized that some principals did not make connections between the grant and certain aspects of their work because they were not all part of the team that wrote the original grant application and/or they had a limited role in administering the grant funds. To fill these gaps, the study team recommended additional data collection with independent school districts (ISD) or charter organization finance and operations staff. Findings from those interviews are the focus of this report.

Participants and Data Collection Timeline

Participants in the spring 2023 finance and operations interviews differed from the participants in the other spring 2023 implementation study data collection. All seventeen CSP Cohort 1 (2021–23) grantee campuses were invited to participate in the principal survey data collection and site-based data collection (principal interviews, focus groups, classroom observations). Six Cohort 2 (2022–23) grantee campuses were available to participate in the principal survey and none of the Cohort 2 grantees campuses participated in site-based data collection.[2]

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[1] Charter School Program Grant Implementation Report, 2021–22 and 2022–23.
[2] Grantees funded from 2021–2023 are referred to as Cohort 1 and grantees funded from 2022–2024 are referred to as Cohort 2.

In contrast, all 19 Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantee districts and charter organizations (representing 29 charter grantee campuses) were invited to participate in finance and operations interviews. The staff participating in the finance and operations interviews typically had a district- or charter-organization level role, e.g., chief executives, finance leaders, or grants personnel, so their interviews sometimes represented more than one CSP grantee campus (Table 1). The finance and operations interviews had an average of two participants (ranging from one to four interviewees; Table 2).

Table 1. *Participating CSP Grantee Districts and Charter Organizations in Finance and Operations Interviews*

Grantee	CSP Campuses Represented (CSP Cohort)
Austin ISD	Greenleaf (Cohort 1)
BASIS Texas	BASIS Benbrook (Cohort 1)
	BASIS Pflugerville Primary (Cohort 1)
	BASIS San Antonio Primary Jack Lewis Jr Campus (Cohort 1)
	BASIS San Antonio Primary Northeast Campus (Cohort 1)
Benavides ISD	Benavides New Campus (Cohort 2)
	Benavides Secondary School (Cohort 2)
Doral Academy	Doral Academy (Cohort 2)
Bob Hope School	Bob Hope School – Baytown (Cohort 2)
Ector County ISD	Ector College Prep Success Academy (Cohort 1)
	Mendez Middle School (Cohort 2)
Edgewood ISD (2 interviews)	Las Palmas Leadership School for Girls (Cohort 1)
	Learn4Life (Cohort 1)
	Roy Cisneros Elementary (Cohort 1)
	Stafford Visual and Performing Art Elementary (Cohort 2)
	Winston Institute of Excellence (Cohort 1)
Essence Prep	Essence Preparatory Charter School (Cohort 2)
San Antonio ISD	Graebner Elementary (Cohort 2)
	Edgar Allen Poe STEM Dual Language Middle School
Fort Worth ISD	Phalen Leadership Academy at James Martin Jacquet (Cohort 1)
Prelude Preparatory Charter School	Prelude Preparatory Charter School (Cohort 1)
Rocketship	Rocketship Denis Dunkins Elementary (Cohort 2)
Royal Public Schools	Royal Academy of Excellence (Cohort 1)
Thrive Center for Success	Thrive Center for Success (Cohort 2)
Universal Academy	Universal Academy – Bartonville (Cohort 2)
Vanguard	Vanguard Van Gogh Academy (Cohort 1)

Source. Texas Education Agency.
Note. CSP stands for Charter School Program. ISD stands for Independent School District. Three CSP grantees are not represented as they did not respond to the interview invitation: Uvalde Dual Language (Cohort 1), School of Science and Technology Schertz (Cohort 1), East Central Cast Lead High School (Cohort 2). Two separate interviews were conducted with representatives from Edgewood ISD.

Table 2. *Counts of CSP Finance and Operations Staff Interview Participants by Role*

Role Type	Participant Count
Organizational Leaders, e.g., Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Executive Director, Superintendent	9
Finance Leaders, e.g., Vice President of Finance, Chief Financial Officer, Budget Officer	8
Grants Personnel, e.g., Federal Programs Director, Federal Grants Manager, Senior Officer of Grants	5
External partners, e.g., consultants, staff from partner organizations	4
Other Personnel, e.g., Principals, Development Coordinator, Consultant, School Secretary	4
Other Leaders, e.g., Academics Executives, e.g., Chief of Schools/Academics, Chief Innovation Officer, Director of Innovation	3
Total	33

Source. CSP Finance and Operations Interviews, 2022–23.
Note. CSP stands for Charter School Program. The number of participants in each of the interviews ranged from one to four.

The study team began requesting recommendations for finance and operations interview participants during spring 2023 data collection with CSP principals. Occasionally the study team made calls to ISD or charter organization offices or referred to the CSP grant application to identify potential participants. Sixteen interviews were conducted between May 12 and July 20, 2023; one participant responded to the interview questions in writing.

Findings

The study team conducted a thematic analysis of the 16 interview transcripts and one written response. The main themes are presented below. Some of the quotes included in this section were edited for clarity. Additional detail on the qualitative analysis procedure is included in Appendix A.

Process for Deciding to Open a New Charter School Campus

Across the grantees, the process for deciding to open a new charter school campus required the input and support of many people and the consideration of a wide range of contextual factors. Typically, multiple individuals or groups engaged in the process of planning for the new campus, designing the campus programmatic focus, and preparing the CSP grant application. Depending on the type of campus, those providing input and support could have included organization leaders, grants staff, board members, nonprofit and university partners, consultants, committees of parents/guardians, students and staff, and business and industry partners.

Across all interviews, a critical part of the process of deciding to open a new campus was ensuring there was a good fit between their organizing mission and vision and the needs and desires of the community within which the charter school campus would operate. Occasionally, determining community fit relied on collecting data (for instance through community surveys). In other cases, the organizing group examined the academic performance of students in the area or held community interest meetings to hear directly from parents and guardians about the types of programming they wanted for their students. When the new campus was a traditional campus that was relaunched in partnership with a charter organization, this exploration included gathering feedback from current administrators and staff to understand how they wanted to approach their work and serve students differently.

> **"We generally do a significant amount of early contact with a community to find out if we're wanted there, frankly."**
>
> -   **Vice President of Finance**

Another common theme was ensuring alignment between the mission and vision for the new charter school campus and the mission and vision of the larger organization, ISD, community partners, or—for independent charter school campuses—with the mission and vision of the founder. The decision to open a new charter school campus also often reflected a desire to leverage the campus to accomplish something specific in the community. These objectives included both a desire to attract students to ISD campuses with declining enrollment and a dedication to improving the academic performance of students identified as being from traditionally marginalized groups identified as economically disadvantaged.

Charter organizations, charter holders, and sponsoring entities hoped to accomplish these goals by engaging students in new ways through innovative programming, e.g., a focus on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (also known as STEAM) programs, international baccalaureate (IB) programs, leadership academies for young women; and through providing programming to meet the needs of students with unique learning needs (e.g., students who qualified for special education services). In one case, the motivation to open a charter school campus included a broader economic goal for the area, increasing students' workforce readiness for high-wage jobs in the area and decreasing the need for students to leave their community to find work after high school graduation.

Funding Sources Used to Open the New Charter School Campus

While the CSP grant was a valued source of funding to assist with the establishment of new charter school campuses, it was not the only source of funding necessary for a successful campus launch. Participants frequently mentioned grants from philanthropic organizations and foundations, local, state, and federal funding, and other types of grants as important

> **"You have to have other money in place. There's no way. I don't know how you would do it without other money."**
>
> - **Chief Executive Officer**

sources of funding. Smaller numbers of interviews referenced funding from business and industry partners and other external partners (Table 3). When those partnerships were place, they were tightly aligned to the mission of the school. For example, one charter school campus that received funding through a university also received teacher professional development and curriculum support from that university. Fundraising, support from parent organizations, and small donations were noted much less frequently than grants from foundations and other organizations.

Table 3. *Counts of Funding Sources Other Than the CSP Grant Used for the Establishment of New Charter School Campuses*

Type of Funding Source	N of Those Indicating This Funding Source
Grants from philanthropic organizations/foundations, e.g., Walton Family Foundation, Breckenridge Foundation, City Education Partners	12
Local/state/federal funds and grants, e.g., local funding, P-Tech, SB 1882, Title I, State Compensatory Education, School Action Fund	11
Parent organizations, small donations	4
Other grants	4
Fundraising	3
Loans	3
Business and industry partners	2
External partners (e.g., universities)	2
Other funding, e.g., bonds, volunteers	4

Source. CSP Finance and Operations Interviews, 2022–23.
CSP stands for Charter School Program. Seventeen documents (16 interview transcripts and one written response) were analyzed for this report. The count represents the number of documents that referenced each type of funding source. Ten of the documents included other comments that did not fit in any of these categories. P-Tech stands for Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools. SB 1882 stands for Texas Senate Bill 1882, which signed into effect by the Texas Legislature in 2017. It provides incentives for districts to contract with an open-enrollment charter school, institutions of higher education, non-profits, or government entities for the purposes of school improvement.

How CSP Grant Funds Were Used to Start Up A Charter School Campus

The primary purpose of the CSP grant was to support the planning (i.e. prior to the first day of school) and initial implementation (i.e., from the first day of school onward) phases of charter school campus establishment. Allowable planning expenses under the grant included items and services aligned to (1) the design of the campus's educational programs, (2) professional development and training for teachers and staff, and (3) special education support. Allowable implementation expenses included one-time start up purchases such as furniture, educational technology, and playground equipment, and for non-consumable learning materials like textbooks and library books. Allowable implementation activities also included marketing (i.e., informing the community about the school) and rent and salaries were allowable costs within certain parameters. Interview responses about the use of CSP funding were in clear alignment with these guidelines, although some expenses were discussed more than others.

> **"The grant in general was incredibly helpful in the startup of furnishing a building and getting everything you need for a classroom and helping with paying for development… it's so much money to get those rooms up and running."**
>
> - **Chief Executive Officer**

The top uses of CSP grant funds mentioned in the interviews were purchases of equipment, supplies and materials, staff salaries, technology for students and staff, and teacher training and professional development. Around half of the interviewees specifically noted purchasing curriculum and furniture as well as updating and repairing buildings. Fewer participants discussed expenses associated with marketing the school and purchasing books for classroom or building libraries.

Communication and Support from the Division of Authorizing

The finance and operations staff interviews provided the study team an opportunity to solicit feedback from grantees about the quality of communication and level of support from the Division of Authorizing team at TEA. Interviewees spoke very highly of the helpfulness, responsiveness, and supportiveness of the team. They also expressed their appreciation for the CSP grant and how helpful it was for the process of getting charter school campuses established. CSP grantees used the funds to launch a campus that was in good repair, with up-to-date furnishings, technology, and curriculum so they were ready to meet their students' learning needs on the first day of school. Participants also were grateful for the opportunity the CSP grant provided them to expand to serve new students and to extend their mission into new communities.

> **"They've been great to work with and the times that I have [contacted them], they've been very supportive. If we have a question, we can just pick them up and call."**
>
> - **Executive Director**

Participants also noted challenges they experienced during the grant application, negotiation, and funding processes and some of the constraints associated with the CSP grant. Although grantees spoke well of the supportiveness and professionalism of the Division of Authorizing staff, several mentioned that additional clarity, assistance, and support during the grant application process would have been helpful so they could feel confident in their decision-making and purchases. Suggestions included more clarity on how funds could be used, more explanation of grant terminology, and

more touchpoints to make sure that the grantees were staying in compliance with the grant requirements.

> **"[Vendors providing professional development] book up very quickly. They just didn't have the availability this late in the year. They make their contracts a year in advance. And so, we are beginning to contract them for next year."**
>
> — **CSP Principal**

Grantees communicated some concerns about the timing of grant negotiations and funding. Several participants noted that there had been delays in receiving their CSP funding relative to the planned date for opening of their school, which led to challenges purchasing some of the needed items (e.g., laptops) and securing some contracted services (e.g., for staff training). Some grantees indicated that they would have liked more time to spend the grant funds, particularly considering the funding delays. Some participants found the CSP grant more restrictive than other grants and would have preferred to have more flexibility to meet campus needs, for example, by funding additional staff aligned to their instructional model, or by helping the campus respond to unexpected changes in enrollment.

Although it was not directly related to communication and support from the Division of Authorizing, grantees also noted the challenges of opening a new charter school campus in the wake of COVID. A few participants noted COVID-related setbacks, including delaying campus opening, the toll on students and their families, and delays in the availability of supplies and materials.

Ongoing Financial Needs

CSP grantees were grateful for the additional funds to help establish their campuses, but they also expressed needs for additional funding, funding for specific programs and campus objectives, and a desire for more flexibility in the use of grant funds. Even with the CSP grant and other funding sources, grantees communicated the sense that there is never quite enough money to do all the things they would like to do for students and staff. Some of these expenses would be ongoing, such as paying staff competitive salaries, hiring more staff to provide services for students who qualify for special education or emergent bilingual(EB)/English

> **"So, I think there's always unmet need. We can always find [things we would like to do] like raising salaries, those kinds of things. But we're sustainable, we can make it work with what we have right now. But yes, I can always take more money to meet many more needs."**
>
> — **Chief Executive Officer**

learners (EL) services, hiring staff for educational programs, like IB, or for additional administrative staff. Other expenses for which additional support was desired were one-time purchases not covered by the grant or expenses that were covered, but for which the available funding was insufficient. Some grantees also expressed a desire for fewer restrictions on the grant so they could cover expenses like staff travel, staff salaries beyond the first 30 days of implementation, or a broader definition of "construction" to include a wider range of physical improvements to the campus.

Limitations

The CSP finance and operations interviews filled some gaps in the main CSP implementation report regarding the ways in which grantees used their CSP funding to establish new charter school campuses and the thinking and motivations that supported their decision-making; however, there were some limitations. The study team collected data from 17 grantee organizations; however, all of the participants submitted successful grant applications. Thus, the findings of this report have limited generalizability to the population of new charter school campuses overall.

The interview format itself posed some limitations. This additional data collection provided more detail on the other funding sources used to establish the new charter school campuses and the ways in which the CSP grant funds were used; however, the conversational format of interviews resulted in examples that were limited by the recollection and perspectives of the participants. If the Division of Authorizing desires a precise understanding of the types of expenditures that occurred during the planning and implementation phases of the grant and a clear sense of the proportion of costs that were covered by the CSP grant in comparison to other funding sources, a financial analysis would be appropriate.

Finally, although the design of the CSP implementation study sought to make connections between the specific objectives during the planning and implementation phases of the grant; these connections were not as clear as originally hypothesized by the study team. On average, the finance and operations staff who participated in this study thought of the CSP grant as one helpful funding source to cover a portion of the costs associated with establishing a new campus rather than as funding for specific strategic purposes.

Appendix A: Methods

Sixteen Charter School Program (CSP) finance and operations interviews were conducted virtually, and one response was submitted in writing. This resulted in 17 documents for qualitative analysis. The outline below describes the study team's analytic procedure.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis Procedure

1. All coders read the rationale for interviewing CSP finance and operations staff (see Report Purpose in the Introduction to this report).
2. One coder tagged all documents in *Atlas.ti*, to indicate the charter partner organization, charter holder, or charter management organization, whether the interview represented more than one CSP grantee campus, and the roles of the participants.
   a. Tables listing the grantees and charter school campuses and staff roles that were represented in these interviews were created for the report introduction.
3. All interviews were then coded thematically.
4. To establish reliability, all coders read one transcript independently; all coders then met to code the document together.
5. Coders used both *a priori* codes developed from during the preliminary analysis and developed additional codes that arose during the group coding.
6. Both high-level as well as intermediate-level codes were identified and defined, with an example and non-example.
7. After the initial meeting, coders independently read and coded a second transcript and then returned as a group to discuss.
   a. During the follow-up meetings, the group resolved any discrepancies.
8. During the initial and follow-up meetings, coders developed a shared codebook.
9. The process was repeated until all coders agreed on the codes chosen, understood the examples and non-examples provided in the codebook, and felt comfortable coding transcripts independently.
10. The analyses resulted in a count of codes for every theme.
    a. These counts could be visualized in tables and bar graphs; however, given the limited number of interviews (N=17, the study team primarily relied on the code counts to identify common themes to highlight in the text of the report.
    b. The study team focused on themes that emerged most frequently *across* interviews, rather than those that were most frequent based on an absolute count of codes. This helped the study team avoid giving more weight to interviews that included multiple examples of the same theme.
    c. The study team used output from the coding process to identify quotes associated with the most common themes.

Appendix B: Charter School Program Grant Evaluation Finance and Operations Interview Protocol, 2022–23

Charter School Program (CSP) Grant Evaluation Finance and Operations Interview Protocol, 2022–23

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has contracted with McREL International and their research partners at Gibson Consulting Group to conduct an evaluation of the Texas Charter School Program (CSP) grant. TEA is interested in learning more about how CSP grantees use this start-up funding to meet important campus objectives. As part of this project, we are gathering input from district and charter management organization staff who lead the administration of the grant.

Please know that this interview is not for grant compliance monitoring purposes, we only want to better understand the variety of ways that the CSP grant funds were used. These interviews will deepen our understanding of how CSP grantees envisioned using the grant funds, the actual expenditures once fully funded, and the ways the CSP grant has been combined with other funding sources (e.g., other grants, fundraising) to achieve important campus objectives. We recognize that some CSP grantees may not have begun to use their funds—in these cases, we will discuss planned uses for the funds.

Thank you for taking time to participate in this interview. It is a critical part of this data collection and analysis effort! This interview should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Confidentiality Policy

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You can opt not to answer any question or stop participating in the interview at any time. Your responses to interview questions will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. We would like to record these interviews so that we can transcribe them and continue to learn from your responses. We want to be clear that only members of the Gibson and McREL research and evaluation team will have access to your interview recordings and transcripts.

Data collected through these interviews will be aggregated and included in a written report that we will submit to TEA. In our reporting of results, you will not be identified by name or school.

Do I have your permission to record the interview?

(If yes, start the recorder and proceed with the interview. If no, the interviewer will take detailed notes throughout the interview.)

Introductions and context

1. Please state your name(s), and how long you have worked for this district/charter management organization.
2. What was your role in preparing the Charter School Project grant application?
   a. Who else was involved?
3. What is your role in supporting the operations of [campus name]?
4. What role do you have in managing the financial administration of the CSP grant?
   a. Who else participates in decision-making about how to use these funds?

Decision-making, startup funding

The remainder of my questions are about preparing to open [school name] and the financial resources needed to open the school.

5. What is the process involved in the decision to open a new school? Who was involved in making the decision and what were some of the most important factors that were taken into consideration?
6. As you were planning and preparing to open [school name], what funding streams did you have access to? How did the various funding sources help to support the successful launch of the school?
   a. *If not addressed directly*, what funding sources were used to acquire or build the school building?
7. Now I'd like to ask specifically about how the CSP grant funds were used to open the school. Please know that this is not a compliance monitoring question, we only want to better understand the variety of ways that the CSP grant funds were used.
   a. Were you part of the team that prepared the CSP grant application?

[Interviewer, share the prepared artifact that summarizes proposed expenses from the grant application]

I'll give you a moment to look over this summary of proposed expenses from the grant application. To your knowledge have the CSP start-up funds been used in alignment with the original vision, or have they been used in other ways to support [school name}?

8. What were some of the other start-up expenses that were addressed with the CSP funding?
9. How important was fundraising to the successful launch and to the ongoing operations of [school name]?
   a. What types of fundraising have you found most helpful so far?
10. Thinking of the communication and support you received from the Division of Authorizing at TEA to help with the start-up and implementation of your CSP grant,
    a. What supports did you find most beneficial?
    b. What would else you have liked to receive from TEA?
    c. Were there any barriers from TEA that constrained your ability to start and run [school name]?

11. Thinking broadly about financing this school's operations, what are some areas where there are still unmet needs?
    a. Will the grant provide sufficient funding to meet these needs? If not where are the biggest funding gaps?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences launching [school name]?

Thank you for sharing your time and thoughts with us regarding the opening and early implementation of [school name]. Your insights will be used to inform the ongoing implementation of the CSP grant.