
TEXANS GETTING ACADEMICALLY PREPARED (TGAP)

The Texas Education Agency's
Gear Up Project

Year One Evaluation Report Executive Summary September 1999-August 2000

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Executive Summary

In 1999, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) received a federal grant for a project known nationally as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). The project's mission is to increase the number of low-income and minority students who are prepared academically and financially to enter and succeed in higher education. In this report, the term *higher education* refers to any education beyond high school at a college, university, vocational or trade school, or other institution leading to a degree or certification. TEA's GEAR UP project, one of 15 in Texas, is officially named Texans Getting Academically Prepared or TGAP. The five-year project began in the 1999-2000 school year and ends in 2004. TGAP has the following three overarching goals:

- *Building capacity.* Building the capacity of educators and students so teachers can adequately prepare students for successful participation in challenging college preparatory programs;
- *Increasing student and family awareness.* Increasing student and family awareness of opportunities for college and financial aid assistance; and
- *Gaining business and community support.* Providing meaningful incentives and support for high student achievement from the business community.

Partners and Related Programs

Texas laid considerable groundwork before TGAP began by developing the Recommended High School Program (RHSP) and the related but more academically rigorous Distinguished Achievement Program (DAP). Shortly before TGAP was launched, the Texas Legislature established the Toward Excellence, Access, and Success (TEXAS) Grant program to provide financial aid to students who complete the RHSP or DAP.

TEA's partners in TGAP include the university outreach centers (UOCs) in Corpus Christi and Laredo, the Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC), and Project GRAD. The UOCs help school districts prepare low-income and minority students for higher education. TBEC recruits and trains presenters for the Texas Scholars program, in which local employers and educators make presentations to motivate students to undertake and complete the RHSP or DAP. TBEC also recognizes students who complete the RHSP as Texas Scholars. Project GRAD, based in Houston, Texas, serves primarily as a model for school districts due to its extensive experience with entire vertical-feeder systems in the inner city to prepare students for higher education. With a corporate sponsor providing its base of support, Project GRAD has also provided stipends, scholarships, and other types of support for high student achievement.

Participating School Districts

Six school districts in south Texas, where there is a concentration of low-income and Hispanic students, participate in TGAP. Each school district has one high school and at least one middle school involved. Table 1 lists each district and the participating campuses. Altogether the sites include eight mid-level schools (one intermediate, two junior highs, and five middle schools) and six high schools, for a total of 14 campuses.

The students at the participating sites are overwhelmingly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged. The teachers at TGAP schools are three times more likely than their peers across the state to belong to a minority group. Teaching experience in TGAP schools is consistent with the state average.

Table 1
Districts and Schools Participating as Sites in TGAP

School District	Jr. High or Middle Schools	High Schools
Laredo ISD	Christen Middle School	Martin High School
United ISD	Garcia Middle School United South Middle School	United South High School
Jim Hogg County ISD	Hebbronville Jr. High School	Hebbronville High School
Corpus Christi ISD	Driscoll Middle School	Miller High School
Robstown ISD	Ortiz Intermediate School Seale Junior High School	Robstown High School
Alice ISD	Adams Middle School	Alice High School

Note: Alice ISD was just beginning to participate in TGAP when the first year of the project ended, so its TGAP activities are not covered in this report.

TGAP's start up began slower than expected, primarily because TEA had to recruit districts to participate in the project and hire staff, three of the six districts did not have TGAP coordinators in place until late in the year, and TEA did not hire a state director until early in the second year of the project. The UOC in Corpus Christi, serving Corpus Christi, Robstown, and Alice ISDs, was fully functioning during the first year. The UOC in Laredo, which was established during the first year as part of the TGAP project, worked with Laredo, United, and Jim Hogg County ISDs. TEA established a new UOC in Commerce to serve east Texas.

Evaluation

The evaluation is a longitudinal assessment of the efforts and effectiveness of the project to prepare low-income and minority students in the six districts in south Texas to enter and succeed in higher education. The first-year evaluation focused on the progress made toward accomplishing the three overarching goals. Evaluators conducted site visits to observe project activities and reviewed brochures, documents and other information about site activities throughout the year. Near the end of the 1999-2000 school year, evaluators conducted surveys of teachers, students, and parents to determine how knowledgeable and optimistic they were about TGAP, higher education opportunities, and financial aid. The teacher survey included items on training sessions and vertical teaming as well.

Baseline data from 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 include student and teacher demographics, student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) reading and mathematics, attendance and dropout rates, completion of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and SAT and ACT testing patterns and scores. Baseline data also permitted comparisons between the TGAP schools and their peer-group campuses, as defined by TEA.

Student cohort analyses track students who transfer in and out of TGAP schools. Cohorts may include continuing students, outgoing transfer students, and incoming transfer students. Assuming sufficient numbers, the effects of one, two, three, or four years of participation in TGAP will be compared to students who participate all five years of the project.

Building Capacity

The primary capacity-building activity for the first year of TGAP involved organizing middle and high school teachers into vertical teams and training those teams in the four core areas: English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Five districts (Laredo, United, Jim Hogg County, Corpus Christi, and Robstown) sent teachers, counselors, and librarians for training on Advanced Placement vertical teaming in January 2000, and all districts sponsored additional professional development, primarily on curriculum writing. All five met again before the 2000–2001 school year to align and strengthen their curricula.

Results from the teacher survey showed that the first-year TGAP training sessions successfully built capacity. Nearly 25 percent of teachers in participating schools received some kind of vertical-team or AP/pre-AP training. Compared to teachers who did not attend training, the teachers who received training were more knowledgeable about TGAP, more optimistic about higher education opportunities for the schools' low-income and minority students, and more approving of the work of their schools generally.

Teachers also provided feedback on making training more effective. The teacher survey preceded about half of the vertical-team training sessions, so the findings must be interpreted within that limitation. Based on their experiences, teachers suggested more frequent training, longer training, and more time to meet and plan. According to teachers, training and presentations should have a more practical focus, be more specific, be more practically oriented toward teachers' specific subject areas, and include more hands-on training. Teachers suggested offering training to all teachers or a larger number of teachers. They also recommended that training should include curriculum and lesson plan samples and focus more narrowly on curriculum. Finally, some teachers requested more coordination, collaboration, and communication across grades, disciplines, and schools.

Teacher survey respondents voiced similar concerns about the effectiveness of vertical teaming. Teachers frequently suggested more time for planning and communicating, particularly during the school day. Teachers wanted more communication and cooperation across grades and schools, and thought all or most teachers should be included in vertical teaming.

Not surprisingly, teachers who attended vertical-team training were much more likely to have an opinion about vertical teaming in their schools. These teachers were considerably more likely to

say that vertical teaming was at least somewhat successful. Teachers who did not attend vertical-team training knew little about it.

More than 95 percent of the respondents reported speaking to their students about college at least sometimes. Most, however, felt they did not receive enough information about college opportunities. Almost half felt their schools were no better than “okay” at telling students about college opportunities. Teachers who attended vertical-team training were more optimistic about the impact of college outreach on students.

To increase student awareness of higher education opportunities, teachers suggested providing more information about college and increasing counselors’ efforts. Specific recommendations included more outreach to parents, a college night, college assemblies, career days, and field trips to colleges. Teachers also frequently suggested inviting guest speakers to talk about college opportunities, such as high school graduates now attending college, recent college graduates, “successful people,” Hispanic community leaders, and college faculty.

About 65 percent of teachers who had attended vertical-team training knew about EXPLORE and PLAN or similar data on student needs. Only 25 percent of the teachers believed their districts used university mentors, and only 13 percent reported having a mentor. Of those who had a university mentor, 83 percent considered the guidance as at least somewhat useful, and 40 percent thought it was very useful. Better use of university mentors is clearly one way to build capacity in the second year of the project.

While TGAP primarily supported the activities of six school districts, TEA also used first year funding to develop materials for statewide use, including a brochure and a tool kit to publicize the RHSP, DAP, and TEXAS Grant program. These materials were the centerpiece of a training-of-trainers session, and subsequent workshops included more than 600 middle school counselors during the first year. TEA also developed a video for Spanish-speaking parents entitled *Antes De Que Sea Demasiado Tarde (Before It’s Too Late)*. This video with English subtitles demonstrated how higher education can be affordable.

Increasing Student and Family Awareness of Higher Education

In the first year, sites targeted activities for middle school students and for students not previously considered college bound. The school districts and TGAP partners offered a variety of services, including summer institutes, preparation and distribution of literature, counseling, college fairs and career nights, field trips to colleges and universities, and in-school presentations such as Great Expectations, a feature of the Texas Scholars program that stresses the value of completing the RHSP.

Several schools offered orientation sessions for incoming middle school or high school students and their parents. Three schools held summer academies to help fifth graders and eighth graders make the transition to the new school. At summer institutes, students received mathematics or science instruction. They also learned about the RHSP and DAP, SAT and ACT tests, and other matters relevant to higher education preparation.

Only a small percentages of students were involved in college tours, summer academies, and other intensive outreach activities. While this probably reflected time and money constraints, efforts should be made to provide such activities for more students. Another first-year concern related to data collection. Districts were not uniformly diligent in collecting sign-in sheets and reporting the number of students participating in TGAP activities.

Based on student survey results, about 80 percent of twelfth-grade students received information on financial aid or other college information from their schools; less than 40 percent of students in other grades reported receiving such information. Nearly 70 percent of all students said their parents had discussed college with them, with this percentage varying by grade. About 80 to 85 percent of eleventh and twelfth graders, respectively, said their parents had discussed college with them, while only 61 percent of sixth graders reported such discussions.

Approximately 65 percent of students intended to pursue higher education, and nearly half intended to go to a four-year university. However, the overwhelming majority of students in TGAP schools (96 percent) believed that college was somewhat or very important in accomplishing what they wanted to do in life. The motivation to attend college did not increase with grade, and motivation did not vary appreciably by race or ethnicity.

Slightly more than 25 percent of student respondents identified insufficient funds as the reason they would not continue their education. Interestingly, a much larger percentage of students expressed doubts about paying for college compared to parents (who responded to a similar item). Students and parents also differed on homework. Higher percentages of parents (65 percent) reported that they had helped their children with homework at least once a week compared to students (20 percent). Students who indicated that their parents had talked to them about college were more likely to say that college was very important compared to students whose parents had not discussed college.

As a part of the project, TEA required each district to form a TGAP task force including parents and business and community representatives as well as administrators, teachers, and counselors. In some districts, task forces did not include parents, did not meet often, were grafted onto a pre-existing committee for which TGAP was only one of many concerns, or did not exist at all.

Evaluators offered the following suggestions for improving parent outreach during the second year:

- Involve parents more in TGAP task forces;
- Explore more active, innovative means of reaching parents. College fairs, telephone calls, home visits, and other forms of direct communication with parents should result in greater parent response;
- Organize parent auxiliary groups, which can yield substantial dividends if they assume responsibility for contacting other parents about early student preparation for higher education; and
- Continue efforts undertaken in the first year to include children in earlier grades and their parents in college awareness activities.

Gaining Businesses and Community Support

The third overarching goal of TGAP was to involve business and community representatives, particularly to help provide students with incentives, rewards, and other support for high achievement. Toward this end, TBEC held various meetings with the Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce and trained approximately 80 business representatives to work with students and parents in the Houston area. Project GRAD also worked with businesses in Houston to obtain scholarships for students pursuing higher education.

Each district's TGAP task force was required to include business and community representatives. Few business and community leaders, however, served on the TGAP task forces during the first year. Recommendations for creating stronger and more effective task forces included:

- Business and community representation on TGAP task forces should be increased;
- If the task force is grafted onto a pre-existing committee, a subgroup could constitute the actual TGAP task force and meet in separate sessions to address TGAP matters; and
- The task forces should make meaningful decisions about TGAP resources, programs, and policies. Otherwise, community and business leaders may lose interest.

Baseline Data

The evaluation included baseline data on student and school performance prior to TGAP participation to help determine the effects of TGAP on the achievement of students and schools participating in TGAP over time, especially in comparison to their peer-group campuses. Although TGAP schools had similar student populations, they exhibited wide variation in performance. On average, student performance in reading and mathematics improved somewhat from 1998 to 1999, and TGAP schools surpassed their peer-group campuses and the state average in completing advanced courses.

The proportion of students at TGAP schools taking college entrance examinations was comparable to the state average. The percentage of students scoring above the state-established criterion¹ on these examinations was less than 10 percent, while the state average was 27 percent. TGAP schools averaged slightly lower ACT scores and much lower SAT scores compared to the state.

Performance on TAAS reading and mathematics tests revealed strikingly similar patterns for the seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade cohorts. For all cohorts, passing rates and TLI values fell below those for the state as a whole, with the largest gaps pertaining to the percentage of students mastering all objectives.

¹ The criterion is 1110 on the SAT I or 24 on the ACT, according to TEA's *Pocket Edition: 1999–2000 Texas Public School Statistics*.