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TEXANS GETTING ACADEMICALLY PREPARED  
(TGAP)

Year Two Evaluation Report  
Executive Summary  
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# TEXANS GETTING ACADEMICALLY PREPARED (TGAP)—YEAR TWO EVALUATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Background

In October 1999, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) received a federal GEAR UP grant. TEA's project, Texans Getting Academically Prepared (TGAP), is a five-year effort that begins at the middle-school level to prepare low-income and minority students for higher education opportunities. TGAP efforts include interconnected activities that support early awareness of and preparation for higher education among students, their families, and schools. The project has eight specific goals, each with supporting objectives. The following are TGAP's 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.

Prior to TGAP, a number of state initiatives promoted student access to higher education. These efforts included the Advanced Placement (AP) program for which the state spends over \$10 million annually for fee subsidies, equipment, professional development, and school incentives and the Recommended High School Program (RHSP) and Distinguished Achievement Program (DAP) that require students to take academically challenging courses to prepare for higher education. Also, in 1999, the 76th Texas Legislature established the Toward Excellence, Access, and Success (TEXAS) Grant program to provide financial support for academically prepared students enrolling in Texas public or private, non-profit colleges or universities.

TGAP represents a partnership that originally included TEA, Texas A&M Precollege Outreach Centers in Alice and Laredo, Project GRAD, and the Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC). AMS Production Group became a partner in May 2001. The project is coordinated by TEA and focuses efforts on six school districts in South Texas (Alice, Corpus Christi, Jim Hogg County, Laredo, Robstown, and United ISDs) with a concentration of low-income, Hispanic students. In total, 14 district campuses (8 mid-level schools and 6 high schools) participate in TGAP.

### Methodology

The evaluation assesses progress toward three broad project goals: *building capacity*, *increasing student and family awareness*, and *gaining business and community support*. The evaluation design relies on a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods and data including document and product reviews; site visits involving interviews and discussion groups; interviews and informal discussions with project partners; teacher, student, and parent surveys; and demographic and

performance data from the Texas Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and the Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). The results presented in this report are for year two (2000-2001) of the TGAP study.

## Results

### Building Capacity

As part of TGAP, TEA established or supported programs to build the capacity of participating schools, educators, students, and parents. Capacity building seeks to ensure that economically disadvantaged students are adequately prepared for, pursue, and succeed in post-secondary education.

**Product development.** TGAP developed a variety of products to increase higher education awareness. Five videos designed to assist parents and students in preparing for higher education covered topics such as academic preparation, college admission exams, and financial aid opportunities. Print products developed to accompany each of the videos included portfolios to assist parents and students in tracking student progress as well as reference materials on the SAT and other tests. In addition, videos, brochures and a CD-ROM were developed to promote TGAP/GEAR UP goals to parents and the community.

**Precollege Outreach Center support.** Two precollege outreach centers (POCs) supported TGAP districts through precollege advising and academic enhancement for students, parental involvement activities, and educator development. POCs in Alice (serving Alice, Corpus Christi, and Robstown ISDs) and Laredo (serving Jim Hogg County, Laredo, and United ISDs) provided services. Altogether, POC services were provided for 8,843 students<sup>1</sup> during the second year of the TGAP program. Most student-focused activities involved college trips or classroom presentations that conveyed information to students. POCs also supported services for 539 parents. One notable parent program—PADRES (Parents Align and Deliver Recommendations for Educational Success)—was developed in Laredo ISD. PADRES brings together parents of 6th-12th grade students in parents' homes to discuss the transition between middle and high school and promote children's success. POCs also provided professional development opportunities and assistance for teachers, counselors, and school administrators and disseminated information about TGAP to participants at events such as Parent Teacher Organization meetings, athletic events, and school career nights.

**Rigorous academic curriculum.** TGAP districts implemented plans to support a rigorous academic curriculum. During the 2000-01 school year, district initiatives encompassed teacher professional development, curricular development by vertical teams of teachers, and the implementation of pre-AP and AP courses in middle and high schools. The College Board delivered vertical team, Building Success, and AP course training, while POCs provided professional development for educators, including Best Practices Institutes, Project CRISS, and other GEAR UP training.

**Teacher development.** To build the capacity of educators, more than 500 teachers participated in TGAP professional development events during the 2000-01 school year. Of those teachers,

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<sup>1</sup> This number represents a duplicated count since some students received more than one service.

approximately 160 attended Advanced Placement training to prepare them to teach college preparatory classes and 234 attended vertical team training to align middle school and high school curricula. Survey responses indicate that most teachers (90%) believed vertical team training was useful, but they recommended more time for training and greater coordination across grade levels. Teachers who participated in TGAP training are more familiar with available college opportunities and options (i.e., RHSP and TEXAS Grant) compared to untrained teachers. Nearly all teachers are now advising students about college opportunities at least sometimes; nevertheless, teachers thought schools could be more effective in raising student awareness through greater parent outreach and the use of former students now attending college.

**Student needs assessment.** Although districts administer the EXPLORE assessment to all 8th graders and the PLAN assessment to all 10th graders, student outcome data are not consistently available for teachers to help address student needs. The percentage of teachers saying districts made assessment results available declined from 67% (1999-2000) to 49% (2000-01).

**Teacher perceptions of TGAP/GEAR UP.** Survey responses for 2000-2001 reveal more positive teacher perceptions of TGAP initiatives compared to 1999-2000. More teachers indicate they are familiar with the project. Increased teacher familiarity with TGAP/GEAR UP suggests that schools have been more effective in communicating with teachers about the project. Also, teachers are currently more optimistic about schools' efforts to raise student awareness of college opportunities than they were in the first year. The more positive perceptions of TGAP/GEAR UP compared to the first program year may be due to a greater proportion of teachers in schools that have now been trained. However, many teachers still believe that the TGAP/GEAR UP project could be improved by providing more information/communication with teachers about the program and including more teachers.

### **Increasing Student and Family Awareness of Higher Education**

Increasing family and student awareness of higher education is a central goal of the TGAP project. The POCs and participating districts have developed a variety of strategies and services to heighten both parent and student awareness of higher education and have provided both groups with advice, information, activities, and programs to help prepare students for successful participation in higher education.

**Student services.** In 2000-01, 51% of students at participating schools (7,889 students) received at least one TGAP-related service provided by POCs or districts. Of the various student services offered through TGAP, college and financial aid counseling and student tours of college campuses were most common. Approximately 29% of students received some form of financial aid counseling, while 9% visited a higher education institution. Other student services focused on preparing students academically for participation in higher education and included career exploration activities, increasing awareness of the RHSP and the DAP, course tutoring, and ACT/SAT preparation. Increasing enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and pre-Advanced Placement (pre-AP) courses has also been a focus in all districts.

**Student educational expectations and perceptions of parental support.** Student survey results indicate most TGAP students (80%) think attending college is very important and most (88%) plan to earn some kind of post-secondary degree. Compared to parents, however, students have a

less positive impression of the extent to which adults support them in pursuing a post-secondary education. In addition, students report that the most important source of college information comes from parents while parents report that their children are most likely to receive information about college at school.

**Student preparation for post-secondary education.** The percentages of students who participate in the kinds of college preparatory activities promoted by TGAP vary by activity. Large percentages of students in both middle school (54%) and high school (46%) report that they have visited a college or university. In contrast, few students report participating in school activities that provide specific preparation and skills for making the transition to college such as tutoring for ACT or SAT exams, attending a class at a college or university, or attending a workshop on college preparation. Similarly, a majority of students report that they are at least somewhat likely to take college entrance exams and to enroll for AP or pre-AP courses, but few students report that they have used the Internet to get information about colleges or universities, or have talked to counselors or teachers about college. Students also express misgivings about their ability to afford to go to college with 37% citing cost as an obstacle. This result is not surprising since most students overestimate or do not know the cost of attending a community college (70%) or a public, four-year university (66%) and 70% are not familiar with TEXAS Grants.

In addition, the percentage of students making preparations for higher education increases as grade level increases. Although expected, this finding suggests a need for greater outreach efforts at the middle school level where college planning efforts need to begin. There is also a strong relationship between having a family member with college experience and various indicators of college preparation. Students who have siblings or parents with some college experience are more likely to be familiar with a four-year university, have taken the SAT test, have taken an AP or Pre-AP course, and have higher educational aspirations than are students who have no family members with college experience. This underscores the importance of more intensive college counseling efforts for students without a family history of college participation

**Parent services.** Altogether, 2,076 parents received at least one TGAP-related service. POCs and participating districts shared information with parents through Walks for Success, Parent Universities, the PADRES program, presentations and face-to-face meetings, as well as direct mailings, phoning, and media advertising. Three districts—Laredo, Alice, and Robstown ISDs—worked with Project GRAD to conduct a Walk for Success. Altogether, 316 volunteers visited 1,191 student homes. Several PADRES meetings were held in Laredo and Alice ISDs.

**Parent expectations and preparation.** Most TGAP parents surveyed (81%) expect their child to attend college. They report that their children are interested in attending, and that they speak to them about college frequently. With respect to the preparation required for college attendance, however, the findings are mixed. Most TGAP parents either overestimate or simply do not know the cost of sending their child to a community college or public, four-year university in Texas. In addition, few parents are familiar with programs to defray college costs such as the TEXAS Grants and the Texas Tomorrow Fund. In addition, only a small percentage of parents say they have received information about college entry requirements (26%) and finances (18%) and only 20% of parents say they have participated in counseling or advising about college. Given this

lack of information, it is not surprising that 56% of parents cite affordability as the greatest obstacle to a college education for their child.

## **Gaining Business and Community Support**

Business and community support for TGAP efforts has occurred through the Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC) and district TGAP Task Forces.

**TBEC.** TBEC efforts focus on the academic performance improvement of students in the state as well as the improvement of students in the six TGAP school districts. During the 77th Texas Legislative session, TBEC advocated for changes in state law and policy to designate the RHSP as the default curriculum and also supported legislation for expansion of the TEXAS Grant program. On the district level, TBEC used TGAP funds to begin developing its GEAR UP web page on the TBEC website to disseminate information about the RHSP, post-high school preparation, and the Texas Scholars Program. TBEC also contracted with the Laredo and Corpus Christi Chambers of Commerce to promote alliances that supported TGAP schools. Chamber-sponsored activities included school presentations by chamber members and assistance with career and college job fairs. Although TBEC has been highly successful on the state level, at this time, efforts to implement the Texas Scholars program and provide other means of business support for the six TGAP districts have been uneven.

**TGAP Task Force.** Although TGAP Task Forces are intended to assist districts in meeting all three TGAP goals, they are uniquely positioned to assist districts in gaining business and community support. Each district is required to form a TGAP Task Force or advisory committee composed of administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, community members, and business representatives. All districts established task forces that met at least twice a year. Task forces appear to serve two kinds of roles. Some are responsible for planning, programming, and budgeting decisions, while others serve as advisors by providing input for administrators after decisions are made. In general, meaningful community and business involvement has been difficult for school districts to achieve.

## **Campus and Student Performance**

Although the TGAP project is in its second year of program implementation, campus and student performance outcome measures reflect only the first implementation year. This is because 1999-2000 PEIMS and AEIS performance data became available from TEA in the fall of the 2000-01 school year; thus, performance data are always one year behind program implementation. Because campuses are in early stages of project implementation, one would not expect to see strong impacts in year two. Still, data establish informative baseline statistics and provide formative information that should allow districts to identify areas for improvement.

**Campus accountability ratings.** Comparisons for 1999 and 2000 accountability ratings reveal that of the 14 TGAP schools, 11 maintained their previous accountability ratings (Acceptable or Recognized), while 2 middle schools advanced to Recognized status and 1 high school achieved the highest, Exemplary, rating.

**Campus-level TAAS performance.** The percentage of TGAP students passing 7th, 8th and 10th grade TAAS Reading has increased gradually since 1998. TGAP campus averages are

comparable to peer-group schools, but passing rates are below the state average. Passing rates for TGAP campuses on 7th, 8th and 10th grade TAAS Math improved markedly between 1998 and 2000. Peer-group campuses as well as the state as a whole also had gains—nevertheless, improvements in TGAP schools' passing rates have placed them only slightly below the state average. TAAS passing rates for TGAP 8th graders on science and social studies increased from 1998 to 1999 but declined in 2000. Passing rates for peer campuses and the state increased over the three years as well. TAAS outcomes for social studies fell far below those for science.

**End-of-course examinations.** For most TGAP campuses, the percentage of 8th-grade students taking Algebra I increased from 1999 to 2000. On average, TGAP student participation is low (10%); however, almost a quarter of students (24%) in one middle school took Algebra I. TGAP students who take Algebra I do well on the EOC examination, with about 79% passing. These results suggest that a limited number of higher achieving students take Algebra I in TGAP middle schools. EOC exam passing rates for high school campuses show that, for all four subject areas, TGAP students' passing rates were similar to peer-group campuses but, as a group, were consistently lower than state averages. Still, TGAP campuses made gains for all subject areas, with noteworthy increases for Algebra I and English II. Despite positive gains in 2000, passing rates were low for Algebra I (24%), Biology (66%), English II (72%), and U.S. History (51%). Passing rates varied widely for individual TGAP campuses, however, with some exceeding state averages.

**College entrance exams.** Over time, TGAP seeks to increase the percentage of students taking college entrance exams. Baseline data show that the percentage of students taking college entrance exams fell from 57% for seniors in 1998 to 50% in 1999. However, these results are for students who took exams prior to TGAP implementation. Data also show that historically, small percentages of students in TGAP districts scored at or above the ACT/SAT criterion (5% to 8%). The percentage of TGAP students scoring at or above the criterion was similar to peer-group campuses, but it was well below the state average (27%). Furthermore, ACT and SAT average scores for TGAP students are consistently lower than state averages. Clearly, there is a need to improve the percentage of TGAP students taking and succeeding on college entrance exams.

**Advanced academic measures.** On average, students enrolled in TGAP high schools have higher advanced course and RHSP completion rates compared to peer-group campuses and the state average. However, in 1999, three TGAP campuses had no students completing the RHSP or DAP, while one campus had more than 80% of students complete these advanced programs. In 1999, 18% of TGAP students completed advanced courses and 19% completed the RHSP.

**Student cohort-group performance.** The TGAP evaluation also tracks the TAAS performance of three student cohorts who are participating in the project. Over the three years (1998, 1999, and 2000), TAAS reading and mathematics passing rates improved for all student cohorts. For TAAS reading, passing rates were stable for 7th graders and increased for 8th and 9th graders. Similar progress was evident for mathematics passing rates. These improvements have helped reduced the gap between TAAS passing rates at TGAP campuses and the state average. Seventh grade reading and mathematics passing rates as well as 8th grade mathematics passing rates for 2000 are consistent with the state as a whole. Unfortunately, student progress has not been

uniform across all TGAP campuses, with some campuses making considerable improvements while others experienced a decline over the period.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

### **Capacity Building**

- TGAP has exposed thousands of students to the possibilities of higher education through its sponsorship of campus tours and classroom presentations. Such efforts should continue and efforts which focus on helping students prepare for their post-secondary education through increasing contact with school counselors, academic preparation through participation in AP courses and the RHSP, and SAT/ACT test preparation should be expanded.
- Teacher training and support efforts related to vertical teaming and AP courses have been extensive and teacher perceptions of these initiatives have become more positive as more teachers have become involved. In addition, most teachers who have participated in vertical team training find it to be useful. Future efforts should focus on the training of additional teachers and supporting districts in their implementation of the vertical team approach.
- Substantial resources have been invested in teacher training, release time, and classroom and curricular support for teachers. There is currently a need for information to be collected regarding changes in classroom practices, implementation of pre-AP and AP coursework, as well as school and district efforts supporting the sustainability of capacity building efforts.

### **Increasing Family and Student Awareness of Higher Education**

- Like their parents, most TGAP students view college as important and plan to earn some kind of post-secondary degree. While many of these students have visited a college campus or have enrolled in an AP course, few report participating in activities that specifically prepare them for higher education and most overestimate or do not know the cost of higher education. This is especially true for middle school students. Future TGAP efforts should expand to include greater emphasis on college preparation and available financial assistance, especially at the critical middle-school level where planning needs to begin and awareness is the lowest.
- While most parents expect their children to attend college, most also lack accurate information on college costs and financial assistance programs. Current parent outreach efforts such as PADRES and Walk for Success remain limited and parent awareness of TGAP continues to be low. Districts and POCs must work harder to provide accurate college cost and financial aid information to parents at existing parent-centered events. Also, successful parent outreach efforts such as Walk for Success should be expanded to all TGAP districts. Such efforts are especially important given that students report that parents are their primary source of information about college.

## **Business and Community Support**

- Although TBEC has been highly successful on the state level in lobbying for the RHSP, TEXAS Grants, and Texas Scholars programs, its efforts in TGAP districts are less clear and inconsistent among districts. TBEC should continue statewide legislative efforts while giving greater attention to assisting all TGAP districts in their efforts. For the future, TBEC should strengthen communication with individual districts and become an integral part of district activities. There is also a need for greater diligence in documenting services delivered by TBEC for TGAP schools.
- TGAP Task Force implementation has been difficult, particularly for rural districts. This is one area in which TBEC is uniquely positioned to assist districts in the utilization of these advisory groups.

## **School and Student Performance**

- Measures of school and student performance have generally improved since 1998, but it is too early to draw conclusions about the effect of TGAP on these various measures. Outcome measures reflect only one year of TGAP implementation because student performance data become available from TEA in the fall of the next school year. Campus-level data, however, provide valuable formative information for districts to identify areas in need of improvement.