

At-Risk Students and the Transition to High School: Texas' Efforts to Support Ninth Grade Success

March 2002



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Prepared for the
Texas Education Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GENERAL INFORMATION

In 1999, the 76th Texas Legislature appropriated \$42.5 million for each year of the 2000-01 biennium for implementation of the Ninth Grade Success Initiative (NGSI). The initiative provides resources that educators may use to design programs for at-risk ninth-grade students. TEA awarded NGSI grants to 226 school districts and 5 consortia (representing 12 school districts). In fall 2000, TEA provided NGSI funding for an additional nine school districts.

This NGSI review relies on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and analysis methods. The primary data collection approaches included collection of student demographic and performance data; review of NGSI proposals; collection of district-submitted program evaluation and activity reports; and site visits involving interviews, observations, and document review.

DESCRIPTION OF NGSI GRANTEES AND THEIR STUDENTS

The distribution of grantees across education service center regions (ESCs) corresponds roughly to Texas population centers. Although district sizes vary, the majority (73%) of NGSI grantees enroll fewer than 10,000 students.

Recent AEIS data show that NGSI districts tend to meet or surpass state averages in most student performance measures. NGSI districts experienced slight increases in rates for student credit in advanced courses from 1998-99 to 1999-00. Student attendance rates and TAAS passing rates equal or surpass state averages. Retention and dropout rates continue to be lower than the state, and dropout rates for NGSI districts decreased slightly across all student groups from 1998-99 to 1999-00. While Algebra I EOC exam passing rates are lower than the state, rates increased in 2000. Other EOC examination passing rates for NGSI districts are consistent with state averages.

NINTH GRADE SUCCESS INITIATIVE ACTIVITIES

NGSI programs offer a range of activities for targeted ninth-grade students. The majority of NGSI districts have *adapted existing curricula* to better meet the needs of targeted ninth-grade students through the introduction of self-paced computer software and the creation of individualized academic plans. A number of districts offer guided, *individualized academic assistance* for students needing additional academic support. These activities include tutoring, mentoring, homework assistance, and reading programs or courses. NGSI districts also have provided a variety of activities to support *classroom instructional enhancements*, including professional development, integration of

technology, and field trips. In addition, NGSi programs implemented *instructional reconfiguration* to more extensively change instruction, using approaches such as extended day activities, teacher teaming, school-within-a-school, and block scheduling. Finally, NGSi districts also provided *modified coursework and course opportunities* for targeted ninth graders, including alternative, innovative, accelerated, trailer, and flexible entry/exit courses.

PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT RESULTS

As part of the grant's requirements, NGSi districts submitted program evaluation reports following each semester of the initiative. These reports requested district-level data on students served and program activities. NGSi programs submitting these program evaluations reported serving between 15,000 and 58,000 ninth grade students each semester.

Program activities. In the fall and spring semesters, programs implemented tutoring most often, followed by technology for basic skills remediation or credit accrual. Group instruction, individual instruction, and counseling were also commonly used. In contrast, programs used group instruction most frequently in the summer semesters, followed by technology, individual instruction, tutoring, and counseling.

The majority of districts used NGSi funds to support English and Algebra I courses, and in the summer semesters, more NGSi programs offered Algebra I for targeted students. Similar percentages of districts used NGSi funds to offer Biology and Integrated Physics and Chemistry (IPC) courses, and the percentage offering these through their NGSi programs increased over time. NGSi districts supported World Geography more often than other social studies courses.

Increasing ninth graders' awareness and involvement in NGSi activities remained an important priority for programs over the first four semesters of the initiative. Districts most frequently initiated contact with students, had one-on-one discussions, and contacted parents. Programs also implemented parent awareness activities – initiating parent contact to discuss the program and distributing mailings advertising the program to parents were cited most often.

Staff participation. Teachers, instructional aides, and volunteers assisted in the implementation of NGSi activities each semester. Information on staff participation appear in the table to follow. Each semester, between 1,500 and 3,000 teachers (paid and volunteer) participated in NGSi programs. With the exception of the first semester of the NGSi, programs had lower student-to-teacher ratios in the summer semesters compared to fall and spring terms.¹

¹ Both paid and volunteer teachers were included in the calculation of student-to-teacher ratios.

Staff Participation and Involvement

Staff	Spring 2000 N=157	Fall 2000 N=200	Spring 2001 N=202	Summer 2000 N=179	Summer 2001 N=187
Number of teachers	2,096	3,012	2,704	1,630	1,630
Number of teachers per program (mean)	11.8	15.9	16.6	9.2	10.7
Student-to-teacher ratio (mean)	10:1	21:1	18:1	11:1	8:1
Number of instructional aides	155	276	314	205	248
Number of instructional aides per program (mean)	0.9	1.4	1.5	1.2	1.5
Number of volunteers	225	378	445	134	73
Number of volunteers per program (mean)	1.2	2.2	2.4	0.8	0.5

NGSI implementation. In their proposals, districts projected the number of targeted students they planned to serve. For every semester, the number of students served lagged behind projections, particularly in the summer terms. In the fall and spring semesters, between 11% and 21% of districts met or exceeded their projections, while only 7% of districts met projections during the summer semesters.

In the final semester of the initiative, districts offered advice for new NGSI grantees. Recommendations fell into two primary categories. *Programmatic elements*, relating to program organization and implementation, included communication and collaboration with all stakeholders, extensive program planning before implementation, and program evaluation issues. Recommendations for *elements supporting student success* included creating a strong parent involvement component, selecting quality staff possessing the skills to work with targeted students, and providing professional development opportunities.

Student performance. With the exception of the first semester of the program, the majority of students earned credits directly through NGSI activities. The table to follow provides NGSI student performance data from the program evaluations.

NGSI Student Performance Data

	Spring 2000	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2000	Summer 2001
Number of students	16,283	40,921	58,011	15,032	16,720
Number of students earning credits	5,586	38,215	39,019	9,376	12,835
Percent of students earning credits	34.3%	94.9%	67.3%	62.4%	76.8%
Number of credits per student (mean)	1.5	1.5	2.0	1.0	1.1

Note. Credits include only credit for courses supported through NGSI. Students may have earned additional credits through activities not funded by NGSI.

ACTIVITY REPORT RESULTS

The grant also required NGSi districts to submit activity reports each semester. These reports requested student-level data for every NGSi participant.

Student demographics. Overall, NGSi programs served a high proportion of minority students, with Hispanic students participating in NGSi activities more frequently than students from other groups. Programs served more African American students in the summer terms than during the fall and spring semesters. The table below presents student race/ethnicity data by semester. The majority of students served by NGSi programs were first-time ninth graders (79% to 85%). Between 14% and 20% had repeated ninth grade once.

Student Race/Ethnicity by Semester (Percent)

Student Race/Ethnicity	Spring 2000	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2000	Summer 2001
Number of students	23,889	40,235	60,161	15,945	16,838
Hispanic	47.7	58.1	55.9	55.9	55.1
White	34.1	26.1	26.4	22.5	22.4
African American	15.5	13.6	15.8	20.0	21.0
Other	2.7	2.2	1.9	1.7	1.5

Note. 1,375 students (5.8%) in spring 2000, 141 (0.4%) in fall 2000, 684 (1.1%) in spring 2001, 120 (0.8%) in summer 2000, and 298 (1.8%) in summer 2001 lacked ethnicity data

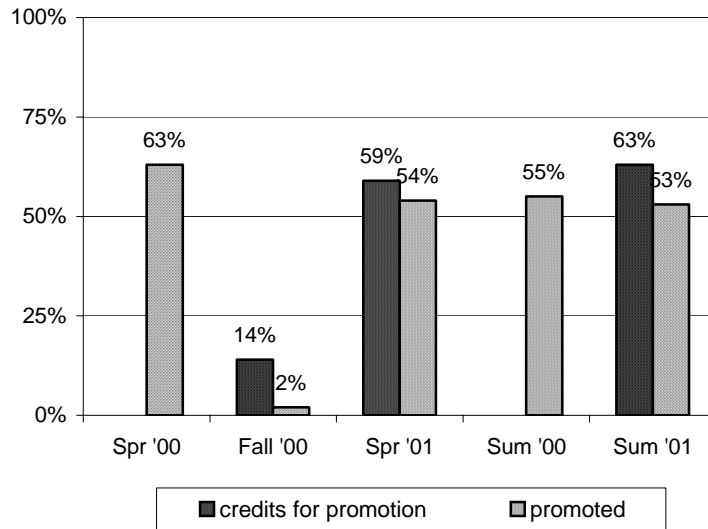
Course enrollment and passing rates. NGSi programs focused considerable attention on Algebra I and English I courses. Targeted students enrolled in these courses more often than in other core or elective courses, and the majority who enrolled in these courses earned course credit – between 69% and 85% received credit for Algebra I, and between 78% and 91% received English I credit. Across all courses, passing rates were higher in the summer terms compared to the fall and spring semesters.

Student promotion. Each semester, districts reported whether each targeted ninth grader was promoted to Grade 10. In addition, beginning in fall 2000, districts also provided data on whether students had earned sufficient credits to be classified as sophomores. As the figure to follow shows, in the spring and summer semesters, approximately 60% of students (59% to 63%) earned enough credits for advancement to Grade 10, and between 53% and 63% were promoted.² As expected, few students earned sufficient credits for promotion in fall 2000, and only 2% of targeted students were promoted.

² Promotion data for the summer terms excludes students who would be first time ninth graders in the following fall semester.

It should be noted, however, that these data do not provide an overall promotion rate because NGSi districts promote students at varying times in the school year (either spring or summer).

Percent of NGSi Students Earning Sufficient Credits for Promotion and Percent Promoted



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While recent AEIS data show that NGSi districts tend to meet or surpass state averages in a number of student performance measures, to this point, student-level AEIS data have not been analyzed solely for NGSi participants. Thus, while aggregated AEIS data provide a context for understanding NGSi districts, data provide an incomplete picture of NGSi impact on targeted students. Furthermore, given NGSi programs' concentration on Algebra I and English I courses, further research should longitudinally explore student performance on end-of-course examinations, TAAS (and later TAKS), and enrollment and credit accrual in advanced mathematics and English language arts courses.

NGSi districts provide a variety of activities for targeted ninth-grade students; however, the process for project implementation and links between program characteristics and student outcomes have not been examined, particularly for self-paced computer software, an essential element of many NGSi programs. Future research should examine how districts implement activities, how activities are used, and the impact of activities and programs on student motivation and achievement. Research should identify model programs and best practices that can be replicated across districts.

