

Students Training for Academic Readiness (STAR)



Year Five
Evaluation
Report

**Executive
Summary**

July 2012



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, is a federally-funded system of grants that focuses on preparing low-income students to enter and succeed in postsecondary educational programs. GEAR UP grants extend across 6 school years and require that funded districts begin providing grant services to students no later than the seventh grade and continue services until students graduate from high school. GEAR UP also requires that districts implement a cohort model in which services are provided to all students in participating grade levels rather than to select groups of students.

The United States Department of Education (USDE) provides for two types of GEAR UP grants: (1) partnerships grants made up of school districts, colleges or universities, and other organizations, and (2) state grants administered by state agencies, either alone or in partnership with other entities. Since 2006, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has implemented a state-level GEAR UP grant, known as Students Training for Academic Readiness, or STAR. STAR is implemented in six school districts in south Texas that serve large proportions of low-income and minority students. These districts include Alice ISD, Brooks County ISD, Corpus Christi ISD, Kingsville ISD, Mathis ISD, and Odem-Edroy ISD. In each district, a high school and its associated feeder pattern middle school participates in STAR.

The 6-year implementation period for STAR spans the 2006-07 through 2011-12 school years, and began with an lead seventh-grade cohort in 2006-07. As this cohort has progressed through school, STAR's services have expanded to include additional grade levels. In 2010-11, the grant's fifth implementation year, the initial seventh-grade cohort was in the eleventh grade and STAR services were provided to all students in Grades 7 through 11.

In addressing GEAR UP's goal of improving students' participation in postsecondary educational opportunities, STAR addresses four core components of improving college readiness:

1. Increase information provided to students and their families regarding postsecondary activities (Information Access and Early Intervention);
2. Increase student access to advanced academic programs (Advanced Academics);
3. Increase training for teachers and counselors regarding the assessment of student abilities and the means for assisting students in postsecondary choices (Educator Preparation); and
4. Increase parent involvement and community and family support in a student's decision to go to college (Family and Community Participation and Support).

In conjunction with these purposes, STAR identifies eight specific goals for participating districts:

1. Increase the number of underrepresented (low-income and minority students) who are prepared to go to college.
2. Increase the number of limited English proficient (LEP) Hispanic students who successfully graduate and go to college.
3. Strengthen academic programs and student services at participating schools.
4. Build an academic pipeline from school to college.
5. Develop effective and enduring alliances among schools, colleges, students, parents, government, and community groups
6. Improve teaching and learning.
7. Provide students with intensive, individualized support.
8. Raise standards of academic achievement for all students.

Each goal contains a set of specific objectives that outline clear criteria for the achievement of each goal across project years. The complete set of STAR goals and their associated objectives are included in Appendix F of this report. STAR addresses its goals through a collaborative partnership that includes TEA, the College Board, the Pre-College Outreach Center (POC) at the College of Education at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and Fathers Active in Communities and Education (FACE).

THE EVALUATION OF STAR

GEAR UP grant requirements also include an evaluation component designed to assess effectiveness and measure progress toward project goals. The findings presented in this report make up the fifth year evaluation of the state's GEAR UP/STAR project. The evaluation is limited to the GEAR UP state grant (i.e., STAR) and does not include GEAR UP partnership grants awarded to other entities in Texas.¹

The purpose of the evaluation is to understand how districts implement STAR and the effectiveness of their implementation strategies in preparing students for postsecondary education. To this end, the evaluation is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of participating STAR schools, students, teachers, and parents?
2. How is STAR implemented across participating campuses?
3. What are the effects of STAR implementation on indicators of student achievement and college preparation?

The evaluation employs a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyses. Data sources include interviews with district and campus-level administrators, core subject area teachers, counselors, and STAR coordinators; surveys of students, parents, teachers, librarians, and counselors; observations in STAR classrooms; and demographic and performance data collected through the Texas Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and the Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS).

The STAR evaluation will produce six reports—one for each year the grant is implemented.² While this report focuses on STAR's fifth implementation year (i.e., 2010-11), it includes comparisons to previous grant years as a means to illustrate changes over time.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Characteristics of Students Participating in STAR and Performance Indicators for STAR Schools in 2010-11

In 2010-11, a majority of students participating in STAR (i.e., Grades 7 through 11) were Hispanic (89%) and from low-income backgrounds (75%). In spite of the large proportion of Hispanic students, only 2% of students receiving STAR services were characterized as LEP, and only 2% received bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) services.

¹In 2010-11, 19 GEAR UP partnership grants, or "Statewide Initiatives," operated in Texas.

²Annual STAR evaluation reports may be accessed at: <http://tcer.org/research/star/index.aspx>

Across STAR campuses, the trends in the TAKS passing rates³ for students receiving grant services reflected the trends of peer campuses⁴ and the state as a whole. Students in STAR’s first cohort (i.e., students in Grade 11 in 2010-11) saw increases in their math and reading/ELA passing rates as well as in “all tests taken.” However, students in the remaining STAR cohorts (i.e., students in Grades 7 through 10) experienced either no changes or declines in their TAKS passing rates in 2010-11.

State-assigned accountability ratings for STAR campuses reflect the lack of growth in TAKS passing rates. In 2010-11, half of STAR campuses (four high schools and two middle schools) were rated *Academically Unacceptable*. The remaining schools (two high schools and four middle schools) were rated *Acceptable*.

STAR Implementation

The evaluation measures the extent to which STAR schools implement activities and services aligned with the project’s four core components. To this end, the evaluation considers STAR campuses’ effectiveness in: (1) Raising Academic Standards, (2) Engaging Teachers and Students, (3) Increasing Student and Parent Access to Information, and (4) Building School and Community Cultures that Support Academic Achievement. The sections that follow discuss key findings for each of these aspects of STAR implementation.

Raising Academic Standards

The measurement of *Raising Academic Standards* reflects the extent to which teachers increase instructional rigor (*Academic Rigor*) and align curriculum (*Curricular Alignment*), and the extent to which STAR schools engage high school students in advanced coursework (*Advanced Academics*). On average, STAR schools *partially* implemented instructional and curricular reforms designed to raise academic standards during the 2010-11 school year, although trends over time indicate increases in students’ engagement in classroom instruction, as well as in the proportions of high school students completing advanced coursework and participating in AP testing.

In Year 5, STAR campuses implemented instructional and curricular strategies focused on increasing *Academic Rigor* inconsistently. Relative to the 2009-10 grant year, data collected in 2010-11 reflect:

- *Decreases* in teachers’ use of questioning strategies requiring higher order thinking at both the middle school and high school levels;
- *Decreases* in teachers’ use of subject-specific instructional strategies in all core content areas at the high school level and in science and math at the middle school level;
- *Increases* in teachers’ use of subject-specific instructional strategies in ELA and social studies at the middle school level; and

³Changes in TAKS passing rates are measured from students’ baseline year (Grade 6 TAKS) to the current school year (2010-11). Because STAR serves a range of grade levels the baseline year for each cohort of students will vary. For example, the baseline year for the first cohort of students (seventh graders in 2006-07) is 2005-06, while the baseline year for the second cohort of students to receive STAR services (seventh graders in 2007-08) is 2006-07.

⁴For each campus in the state, TEA has created a peer or comparison group of 40 public school campuses selected on the basis of six student demographic characteristics, including the percentages of African American, Hispanic, and White students, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, the percentage of limited English proficient students, and the campus mobility rate (2007 Accountability Manual, TEA). For a specific performance indicator, TEA reports the median value of the 40 comparison campuses on that indicator. Thus, peer groups allow for comparisons of campus performance for similar schools.

- *Increases* in student engagement in classroom activities at both the middle school and high school levels.

Notably, middle school students have shown progressively higher levels of engagement across STAR's implementation years. Results at the high school level have fluctuated across years, but reached their highest level in 2011.

As in previous evaluation years, teachers reported that time and scheduling constraints continued to limit *Curricular Alignment* efforts on STAR campuses. On average, surveyed teachers said they met in vertical teams to plan aligned instruction only once or twice a semester. In addition, some teachers said that the use of vertically aligned curricula, such as CSCOPE, reduced the need for teachers work in vertical teams. Despite the challenges of meeting in vertical teams, many teachers highlighted the value of time spent collaborating with colleagues to plan instruction, noting that shared planning time facilitated the development of lessons that better prepared students for subsequent grade levels and college coursework.

STAR high schools have consistently improved students' participation in *Advanced Academics* across implementation years, although some data indicate that the rigor of instruction in advanced courses is not yet sufficient to prepare students for college coursework. Year 5 data indicate that:

- 20% of students in STAR high schools took advanced courses⁵ (e.g., AP or dual credit courses) relative to only 14% of students in the grant's first year (i.e., 2006-07);
- 19% of students in STAR high schools participated in AP testing relative to only 9% of students in the grant's first year; and
- Only 5% of students in STAR high schools who participated in AP testing earned a score of 3 or better relative to 8% of students in the grant's first year.⁶

These findings suggest that STAR high schools have been successful in encouraging students to enroll in AP courses and participate in AP testing, but they have not provided students with the level of academic preparation needed to be awarded college credit for AP coursework.

Engaging Teachers and Students

The *Engaging Teachers and Students* component of STAR implementation measures the degree to which teachers and students are engaged in achieving program goals and considers (1) *Teacher Engagement in Professional Development Activities* and (2) *Student Engagement in Schooling*. Overall, STAR campuses *substantially* engaged teachers and students during the project's fifth year, although scores for this component declined in 2010-11 relative to previous evaluation years.

Teachers have consistently reported high levels of engagement in professional development across all implementation years, although survey responses in 2010-11 reflected a small decrease at the high school level. In interviews, some teachers said that STAR was receiving less emphasis as it entered its final years, which may partly explain the decline in teachers' engagement.

⁵Data representing student participation in advanced courses are lagged a year. That is, Year 5 indicators rely on data collected during the 2009-10 school year, and Year 1 indicators rely on data collected during the 2005-06 school year.

⁶Although policies vary, most colleges award college credit for AP test scores of 3 or higher.

STAR campuses have had high levels of student engagement across evaluation years, but scores declined somewhat in 2010-11, particularly at the middle school level. This finding is likely related to a reduced focus on STAR implementation as the grant enters its last years. Results for middle schools also suggest that STAR has received less attention since the lead STAR cohort (seventh graders in 2006-07) moved to high school.

Increasing Student and Parent Access to Information

STAR provides increased access to information about postsecondary educational opportunities as a means to increase academic achievement and develop college-going cultures among low-income students and their families. STAR informational resources are focused on improving parents' and students' ability to plan and prepare for long-term educational goals. In measuring this component of STAR, the evaluation considers schools' effectiveness in providing information to (1) students (*Student Access to Information*) and (2) parents (*Parent Access to Information*).

Across years, STAR campuses have provided students with access to information that approached substantial levels; however, results for 2010-11 mark a decline from the levels observed in previous years, particularly at middle schools. Proportionately, fewer middle school students reported familiarity with postsecondary opportunities, such as 4-year colleges, community colleges, and vocational/technical schools. Middle school students' awareness of college entrance requirements and financial aid also declined. In contrast, these measures generally increased at the high school level.

On average, parents have had *partial* access to information across STAR implementation years, and results for 2010-11 indicate that both high school and middle school parents had less access to information than in previous grant years. Less than a third of surveyed parents reported receiving information about college planning topics from their students' school in 2010-11, although most parents said they talked to their students about college planning and provided support for academic goals.

Building School and Community Cultures That Support Academic Achievement

STAR also seeks to support academic outcomes by building school and community cultures focused on student achievement. In measuring the degree to which school and community cultures provide support for student outcomes, the evaluation considers: (1) *School Environment* and (2) *Parent and Community Support*.

Across grant years, results for both middle schools and high schools have indicated that *School Environments* provide substantial levels of buy-in and support for STAR. Despite considerable administrative turnover in some districts, staff on STAR campuses have generally agreed that school leaders support grant goals, foster buy-in among staff, and encourage innovation in instruction.

Evaluation findings for each STAR implementation year have indicated that *Parent and Community Support* has been substantial; however, results from recent evaluation years (i.e., 2009-10 and 2010-11) reflect declines in parent support relative to previous grant years. In interviews conducted in spring 2011, school administrators highlighted the challenges of increasing parents' engagement in school activities and raising their expectations for students' academic outcomes, noting that some parents were resistant to schools' efforts to engage students in rigorous coursework.

THE ONGOING EVALUATION

The evaluation will continue to gather data across the project's sixth implementation year (i.e., 2011-12), including survey and site visit data and demographic and performance data collected by TEA. As the lead STAR cohort progresses through high school, the evaluation will focus on how districts' implementation strategies change in order to meet the needs of students with immediate college planning needs and how districts' efforts may affect students' postsecondary outcomes. In addition, the evaluation will consider how districts plan to sustain the implementation of STAR's reforms when grant funds expire in 2012.

Texas Center for Educational Research

P.O. Box 679002

Austin, Texas 78767-9002

800.580.TCER (8237)

512.467.3632 512.467.3658 (fax)

tcer.org

