

Students Training for Academic Readiness (STAR)



Year Four
Evaluation
Report

**Executive
Summary**

April 2011



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, project strives to equalize low-income students' access to higher education by increasing their participation in rigorous coursework, providing expanded opportunities for low-income students and parents to learn about postsecondary educational opportunities and financing options, and forging strong partnerships between school districts, colleges, and community support groups. Created as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, GEAR UP began in 1998 as a system of federally funded grants targeted to schools in which at least 50% of students are designated as low income by their eligibility for free- or reduced-price lunches. GEAR UP grants extend across 6 school years and require that districts begin providing services to students no later than the seventh grade and that services continue until students graduate from high school.

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. In 2006, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) applied for and received a state grant to administer a GEAR UP project in six Gulf Coast area school districts. The state grant, titled Students Training for Academic Readiness, or STAR, is implemented in Alice ISD, Brooks County ISD, Corpus Christi ISD, Kingsville ISD, Mathis ISD, and Odem-Edroy ISD. Each STAR district includes a high school and its associated feeder pattern middle school in the project.

STAR's 6-year implementation period encompasses the 2006-07 through 2011-12 school years. GEAR UP operates on an add-a-cohort model, in which the grade levels served by the grant expand as students progress through school. In STAR's initial grant year (2006-07), services were focused on students in Grade 7. In STAR's final year (2011-12), the initial Grade 7 cohort will be in Grade 12, and all students in Grades 7 through 12 will participate in grant services.

In addressing GEAR UP grant objectives, the STAR project seeks to:

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 project 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. STAR addresses its goals through a collaborative partnership that includes TEA, the College Board, the College of Education at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Fathers Active in Communities and Education, and the National Hispanic Institute. GEAR UP grant requirements include an evaluation component designed to assess effectiveness and measure progress toward project goals. The STAR evaluation is limited to the GEAR UP state grant and does not include GEAR UP partnership grants awarded to other entities in Texas.¹ The findings presented in this report make up the fourth year evaluation of the state's GEAR UP/STAR project.

DATA SOURCES

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).

MAJOR FINDINGS

The sections that follow present key evaluation findings from Year 4 (2009-10) of the STAR grant. In 2009-10, STAR's initial cohort was in the tenth grade and STAR services were provided to students in Grades 7 through 10.

Characteristics of Students Participating in STAR and Performance Indicators for STAR schools in 2009-10

In 2009-10, a majority of students in the STAR cohort (i.e., Grades 7 through 10) year were Hispanic (89%) and from low-income backgrounds (76%). In spite of the large proportion of Hispanic students, only 3% of students receiving STAR services were characterized as limited English proficient (LEP), and only 2% received bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) services.

Across grade levels, students participating in STAR had changes in their TAKS passing rates that were largely similar to students attending peer campuses² and schools statewide (i.e., the state average). Changes in TAKS passing rates were measured from students' baseline testing year (Grade 6 TAKS) to the current school year (2009-10). 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.

A third of STAR campuses (four schools) improved their academic outcomes and raised their rating from *Acceptable* to *Recognized* in 2009-10. Most remaining STAR campuses (seven schools) were rated *Acceptable* and one school was rated *Academically Unacceptable* for the 2009-10 school year.

STAR Implementation

The evaluation measures the extent to which STAR schools implement activities and services aligned with the project's four core components: (1) Raising Academic Standards, (2) Engaging Teachers and

¹In 2009-10, 18 GEAR UP partnership grants and one state grant operated in Texas.

²For most schools in the state, TEA has identified a peer or comparison group public schools that enroll similar students. The peer campuses facilitate comparisons of academic outcomes across similar schools.

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 the implementation of each component.

Raising Academic Standards

Districts that were successful in raising academic standards developed comprehensive systems of change across implementation years. Administrators in such districts clearly communicated goals, as well as staff's roles in meeting goals; provided ongoing support and professional development to increase buy-in and build capacity; and implemented systems of monitoring to ensure instructional strategies and program services were implemented as intended.

On average, researchers observed rigorous instruction to a moderate extent during classroom observations conducted during the 2009-10 school year. This marks an increase over prior implementation years, when rigorous instruction was present to a *small extent*. Increased instructional rigor was more evident at the high school level where teachers implemented higher order thinking and AP subject specific instructional strategies to a greater extent in 2009-10 than in previous implementation years. In addition, researchers observed higher levels of student engagement in 2009-10.

Time and scheduling constraints continued to limit teachers' participation in vertical teams during the 2009-10 school year. Teachers in STAR schools used College Board vertical teaming strategies *sometimes* and met as vertical teams *one to two times a year* in 2009-10. A majority of teachers cited scheduling constraints between middle and high schools as the primary barrier to implementing vertical teams. While high schools benefited from individualized training and support provided on campus by College Board consultants during the 2009-10 school year, some middle school teachers experienced scheduling conflicts that limited their participation in vertical team training offered at the high school.

STAR high schools increased students' participation in advanced courses and Advanced Placement (AP) examinations. Across STAR high schools, about 14% of students participated in advanced courses during the 2009-10 school year. STAR high schools also improved students' participation in AP exams and the percentage of students earning a score of 3 or higher, which ensures credit at most colleges and universities.

Engaging Teachers and Students

STAR campuses substantially engaged teachers and students during the 2009-10 school year. Schools provided teachers with opportunities for ongoing professional development and increased students' interest in school activities.

Teachers in STAR high schools participated in professional development to a greater extent than did middle school teachers. Scheduling conflicts limited some middle school teachers' participation in training activities offered at the high school.

STAR campuses provided substantial services and support designed to engage students in school. On average, students in STAR schools participated in about *four unique activities* designed to academically engage students, such as mentoring, tutoring, and counseling. Additionally, STAR schools maintained attendance rates comparable to the state average.

Increasing Student and Parent Access to Information

Most students in STAR schools were unaware of postsecondary opportunities and the processes necessary to enroll in them. Students in most districts reported they were *somewhat familiar* or *very familiar* with less than two of the three postsecondary opportunities (i.e., 4-year colleges and universities,

community colleges and junior colleges, and vocational and technical schools. The largest proportion of students reported they were only *somewhat familiar* with colleges and universities. Large proportions of students reported they did not receive information about college entrance requirements (24%) or financial assistance (48%). Most students received a majority of postsecondary planning information from their parents, but high school students increasingly turned to school and GEAR UP staff for information.

Most parents of students attending STAR schools did not receive postsecondary planning information from school staff and were unaware of the processes necessary for their students to enroll in a postsecondary educational opportunity. Approximately a third of parents received information regarding college entrance requirements, financial assistance, or course selection and an even smaller proportion of parents received information addressing all three topics (14%). Interestingly, the proportion of parents receiving planning information decreased, but the proportion of parents receiving information across all three topics increased in 2009-10 relative to previous grant years.

Building School and Community Cultures that Support Academic Achievement

In districts creating school environments supportive of academic achievement, administrators actively involved teachers in grant planning, aligned the STAR program to their campus and district needs, and accepted implementation challenges as opportunities for growth in future implementation years.

Districts experiencing administrative turnover struggled to create positive school environments because of poor communication about STAR's goals and activities. In addition, lack of buy-in persisted in some districts as staff continued to view STAR as a conflicting priority that competed for time and resources with other district initiatives.

STAR schools earned substantial staff buy-in and support for STAR programming during the 2009-10 school year. Teachers generally *agreed* that staff were committed to STAR strategies and that leadership supported their efforts. Additionally, teachers *agreed* that their campuses supported ongoing learning and innovation.

Most STAR districts struggled to maintain parental involvement in 2009-10. Districts provided STAR information to parents during popular school functions, and sought to increase the availability of information outside of school by including GEAR UP information at extra-curricular events and implementing home visits, parent mentor programs, and college readiness information centers in locations throughout the community.

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