Students Training for Academic Readiness (STAR)

Year Three Evaluation Report

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TEXAS GEAR UP

This report presents findings from the Year 3 evaluation of Texas' state-level Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, grant. GEAR UP grant requirements include an evaluation component designed to assess program effectiveness and to measure progress toward project goals. To this end, the evaluation considers 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?

BACKGROUND

The federal GEAR UP program 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. 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) partnership 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 six school districts in south Texas: 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 operates on an add-a-cohort model, in which the grade levels served by the grant expand as students matriculate. In the grant's initial year (2006-07), services were focused on the seventh-grade cohort, and as this cohort progresses, the grant expands to include each subsequent grade level until the initial cohort completes the twelfth grade. In 2008-09, the grant's third year, STAR's initial cohort was in the ninth grade.

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.

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).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF STAR DISTRICTS AND CAMPUSES

The sections that follow describe the characteristics of STAR districts and campuses during the 2008-09 school year, and provide comparisons to state averages. Findings are drawn from AEIS data for the 2008-09 school year.

On average, STAR districts lagged the state in terms of wealth and spending. In 2008-09, average district wealth per student in STAR districts was about $184,000 less than the state average ($268,198 in STAR districts vs. $451,906 for the state). In 2008-09, STAR districts spent an average of $709 less per student on instruction than schools across the state ($5,525 in STAR districts vs. $6,234 for the state).

STAR cohort students (students in Grades 7 through 9 in 2008-09) comprised larger proportions of Hispanic and low-income students than state averages in 2008-09. Hispanic students comprised 88% of STAR cohort enrollment compared with 45% statewide enrollment (middle and high school campuses only). In addition, 74% of cohort students enrolled in STAR campuses were economically disadvantaged compared with 50% statewide (middle and high school campuses only).

The percentages of STAR cohort students enrolled in special programs differed from state averages in 2008-09. For example, compared to state averages, a higher percentage of cohort students were in special education (16% vs. 11%), and a lower percentage were in bilingual/English as a second language programs (3% vs. 7%).

Teachers on STAR campuses differed from 2008-09 state averages for middle and high school teachers. Teachers on STAR campuses had slightly less experience compared with teachers across the state (11 vs. 12 years experience). Compared to the state average, STAR schools employed a larger percentage of beginning teachers (11% vs. 8%), a larger percentage of instructional aides (13% vs. 10%), and a much larger percentage of minority teachers (63% vs. 30%).

YEAR 3 (2008-09) PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The results presented in this section are drawn from AEIS Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test, or TAKS, data from 2005-06 through 2008-09. The focus is on three groups or cohorts of STAR students. Cohort 1 includes STAR students who were in Grade 9 in 2008-09 and in Grade 6 in their baseline year of 2005-06. Cohort 2 STAR students were in Grade 8 in 2008-09 and in Grade 6 in their

baseline year of 2006-07, and Cohort 3 students were in Grade 7 in 2008-09 and in Grade 6 in their baseline year of 2007-08.

For all three groups of STAR students, average baseline to 2008-09 changes in TAKS reading/English language arts, mathematics, and all tests taken passing rates were similar to those of peer campuses and the state overall. For example, for Cohort 1, the average baseline to 2008-09 change in TAKS passing rates was -7 percentage points. This compares to a -5 percentage point change for peer campuses and -6 percentage points for the state. Cohort 2 experienced a -2 percentage point average baseline to 2008-09 change in TAKS passing rates, which was similar to peer campuses (-1 percentage point) and the state (-2 percentage points). The average baseline to 2008-09 change in TAKS passing rates for Cohort 3 was -4 percentage points which was the same as peer campuses and the state. Thus, STAR students had changes from baseline to 2008-09 TAKS passing rates that were comparable to peer campus students and state averages.

STAR IMPLEMENTATION

As a means to provide ongoing support for STAR, the evaluation incorporates a measure of program implementation that identifies areas of strength and weakness in district and campus implementation strategies. The approach identifies four core components of STAR implementation based on the program's broad goals. These core components include:

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.

Using STAR's eight goals as guides, researchers identified a set of supporting components for each of the core components listed above and developed survey items and a classroom observation instrument that measured the varied dimensions of supporting components. Researchers worked with TEA staff and program administrators to identify whether supporting components have been implemented to a (1) *minimal*, (2) *partial*, (3) *substantial*, or (4) *full* degree. The sections that follow summarize findings from the analysis of STAR implementation in 2008-09, supplemented by findings from spring 2009 interviews with administrators and focus group discussions with teachers on STAR campuses.

Raising Academic Standards

Although academic rigor was present in STAR classrooms to a *small extent* in 2008-09, this marked an improvement over 2007-08. This finding results from teachers' increased use of higher order thinking skills in instruction, particularly in math classrooms.

Students in STAR core content area classrooms spent more time at *low* and *high* levels of engagement in 2008-09. Middle school students were more likely to be highly engaged and high school students were more likely to exhibit low levels of engagement.

Campuses with higher *Raising Academic Standards* scores tended to have stronger administrative support for STAR. In these schools, principals stressed the importance of rigorous instruction, provided frequent feedback and support, and held teachers accountable for implementing challenging lessons.

Campuses that struggled to increase instructional rigor implemented STAR strategies unevenly. On these campuses, many teachers said they failed to see the benefit of STAR and did not consider STAR strategies practical for regular classroom use.

Teachers on STAR campuses sometimes used vertical teaming strategies, but *rarely* met formally as vertical teams. Many STAR campuses struggled to implement vertical teams, and teachers pointed to

scheduling constraints as a primary barrier. Staff turnover and poor communication between grade levels also presented challenges to vertical team implementation.

The STAR campuses experiencing the greatest academic success in 2008-09 were those that made substantial curricular or instructional changes. Schools that revised their implementation strategies to focus on instruction tended to have improved student outcomes, such as increased TAKS scores and higher passing rates on AP exams.

Engaging Teachers and Students

In 2008-09, STAR schools *partially* engaged teachers and students in activities designed to improve teaching and learning. Such activities included professional development for teachers, as well as tutoring and mentoring services for students.

STAR schools *partially* supported teachers' participation in professional development. Only 29% of teachers attended STAR-provided training sessions in 2008-09. However, several districts implemented a "trainer-of-trainers" model in which a few teachers attended formal training and then returned to their campuses to train colleagues.

STAR schools provided a variety of services designed to engage students in education; however, student participation tended to be low. Services included tutorials, enrichment programs, and credit recovery opportunities. In addition, several schools attempted to engage students by linking postsecondary education to students' future goals.

Some districts implemented programs for struggling students as a means to increase engagement and improve student outcomes. Several districts implemented mandatory Saturday school for credit recovery or attendance problems, pull-out enrichment courses during the regular school day, and partnerships with local community colleges and vocational schools to provide students opportunities to earn certifications and degrees.

Increasing Student and Parent Access to Information

STAR schools *partially* implemented services designed to provide postsecondary educational information to students and parents. STAR schools continued to implement college or career fairs and campus tours in 2008-09. In addition, schools provided information through postsecondary planning workshops, home visits, and school-sponsored opportunities to interact with college students.

Students received information at various levels. Sixty-seven percent of students on STAR campuses received information about postsecondary entrance requirements and 50% of students received information about financial assistance. Not surprisingly, high school students received information to a greater extent than middle school students.

Students received a majority of their postsecondary planning information from parents in 2008-09. However, only 10% of surveyed parents had received information about course selection, college entrance requirements, and financial assistance.

Parents and students had high academic aspirations. Most surveyed parents expected their child would earn a 4-year degree. Similarly, most students expected to earn a 4-year or graduate degree. Both parents and students considered cost to be the primary barrier to students' enrollment in postsecondary educational opportunities.

Building School and Community Cultures that Support Academic Achievement

STAR schools *substantially* implemented services and activities designed to build supportive school and community cultures. Districts earning higher component scores attempted to implement all components of the STAR program. Successful districts attended POC training sessions designed to improve school culture and collaborated with STAR partners to overcome barriers to parent and community involvement.

Surveyed teachers felt their school environments were innovative and committed to STAR goals. Teachers also reported that administrators in STAR schools provided effective leadership and that teachers committed to school and STAR initiatives.

Several districts faced barriers to fully committing to the STAR program. Districts facing accountability sanctions resulting from low TAKS scores described STAR as a conflicting priority that competed for time and resources. Administrators in several districts did not consider some STAR activities and services to be relevant to school improvement. Accordingly, these districts participated in some STAR activities at lower rates.

Parents and communities supported STAR. Teachers reported high levels of parent and community support. Surveyed parents indicated they supported STAR goals at home, assisting with their child's education and postsecondary planning one to two times a week. Additionally, parents in all but one district attended a school activity or visited their child's school at least five times in 2008-09.

Most schools experienced increased parent involvement during the 2008-09 school year. Schools that were successful in engaging parents collaborated with STAR partners, combined informational activities with student performances, created activities that focused on parents, and provided incentives for attendance.

Overall Implementation

On average, STAR campuses *partially* implemented STAR activities and services in 2008-09. Across the program, schools supported STAR, but had difficulty implementing specific initiatives and achieving project goals, such as supporting teachers' and students' professional and academic growth, increasing academic standards, and providing postsecondary information to parents and students.

Findings from the 2008-09 evaluation suggest that increased experience with the STAR project may improve implementation quality. On average, middle schools, in their third year of implementation, earned higher scores than high schools, which were in their first year of implementation in 2008-09.

STAR PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

To assist districts in achieving the project's purposes and goals, STAR includes a set of partner organizations that provide services and design activities to support program implementation. STAR partners include: (1) the Pre-College Outreach Center (POC) at Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC), (2) the College Board, (3) the National Hispanic Institute (NHI), (4) Fathers Active in Communities and Education (FACE), and (5) the Faculty Fellows Program (TAMU-CC and Texas A&M University-Kingsville).

STAR administrators expressed a desire for greater control over partner organizations' programs and services. Most administrators wanted to select partner organizations that addressed specific school needs. Administrators described scheduling conflicts as a barrier to partnerships, and suggested partners develop calendars collaboratively with district staff.

Most administrators on STAR campuses appreciated the support POC provided districts and said they could easily communicate with POC representatives regarding challenges to STAR implementation. At the end of 2008-09, POC hired College Access Coordinators (CACs) to assist districts with STAR implementation.

School staff expressed a desire for POC training to better meet specific campus needs. Teachers reported that some training opportunities were either too broad or too specific to be of value. School administrators said scheduling conflicts were a primary challenge to attending POC trainings.

Administrators in several districts considered professional development provided by the College Board to be the most useful partner service. Teachers identified timed writings, inner/outer circle discussions, poetry analysis, and thinking maps as useful strategies introduced by College Board professional development.

In 2008-09, FACE collaborated with other STAR partners to introduce new services to engage parents in students' education. FACE was considered successful at the middle school level, but met resistance at several high schools where some staff felt activities were not appropriate for older students.

Administrators in several districts reported that NHI was better organized and increased student participation during the 2008-09 school year. Most districts experienced communication barriers with NHI and administrators indicated they were unaware of the program's services due to the student-driven nature of the organization; however, NHI programs were popular with students and families.

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