

Students Training for Academic Readiness
(STAR)

Year One Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, 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 six 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.

Students Training for Academic Readiness (STAR) is the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) second state-level GEAR UP grant. During the 2006-07 school year, STAR began providing services to six south Texas school districts: Alice ISD, Brooks County ISD, Corpus Christi ISD, Kingsville ISD, Mathis ISD, Odem-Elroy ISD. STAR districts exceed state averages in the proportion of low-income and minority students they serve and lag state averages in terms of their testing outcomes and graduation rates. In addition, the TEA determined that the STAR districts exhibit a lack of family and community resources critical to supporting participation in higher education and demonstrate a variety of challenges with respect to preparing students for successful postsecondary experiences. Each STAR district includes a high school and its associated feeder pattern middle school in the project.

Through a collaborative partnership that includes the TEA, P-16 Partnerships for Student Success at the College of Education at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi (P²S²), the College Board, Fathers Active in Communities and Education (FACE), and the National Hispanic Institute (NHI), the STAR project seeks to increase (1) the information available to students and their families about postsecondary educational opportunities, (2) students' access to advanced academic programs, (3) training for teachers and counselors, and (4) parent and community support for a student's decision to go to college.

The 2006-07 evaluation describes the process of first year implementation and presents baseline indicators of student enrollment, academic performance, and postsecondary participation that will act as benchmarks for measuring districts' progress over the course of the STAR project.

DATA SOURCES

The evaluation employs a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyses. Data sources include document reviews of district grant applications; interviews with district and campus-level administrators, core subject area teachers, counselors, and STAR coordinators; surveys of students, parents, teachers, librarians, and counselors; 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

Characteristics of Star Districts and Campuses

On average, STAR districts lagged the state in terms of financial characteristics in 2005-06. Average district wealth per student in STAR districts was \$200,474 compared with \$302,141 for the state. STAR districts also spent an average of \$3,292 less per student on instruction than schools across the state (\$4,305 in STAR districts versus \$7,597 for the state, on average).

STAR schools enrolled substantially larger proportions of Hispanic and low-income students than state averages in 2005-06. Hispanic students comprised 85% of STAR districts' enrollments compared with a 45% statewide enrollment, and 68% of STAR students was characterized as low income compared with 56% of students statewide.

In terms of their educational programs, STAR campuses enrolled proportionately more students in special education (16% versus 11%) and career and technology education (51% versus 20%) than Texas schools in 2005-06. Despite their concentration of Hispanic students, STAR schools enrolled notably lower proportions of limited English proficient (LEP) students (4% versus 16%) and proportionately fewer students in bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) programs than schools across the state (3% versus 15%).

Planning and Implementing Star

Delays in the GEAR UP grant application cycle and late grant awards for 2006-07 meant that districts did not begin implementing STAR until midpoint in the school year. In addition, several STAR campuses were subject to Title 1 accountability sanctions, which affected the priority given to STAR objectives. In spite of challenges, STAR districts implemented a variety of college readiness activities during the project's first year and all districts reported success with the project.

Districts took a variety of approaches to developing GEAR UP grant applications, from forming teams of administrators and counselors to plan activities and budgets to assigning grant writing responsibility to a single counselor. In some instances, the persons charged with developing the grant proposal were not involved in implementing grant activities. Districts generally did not include teachers in the planning process. Teachers' lack of familiarity with the project resulted in difficulty gaining teacher buy in for some STAR districts; however, teacher resistance eased once they became familiar with their project roles.

STAR districts committed the largest share of first year grant dollars to payroll costs (50%) to cover the expense of employees who spend all or most of their time working on STAR. Supplies and materials absorbed the second largest share of funds (27%), followed by other operating costs (14%), and professional and contracted services (8%).

STAR's first year activities focused primarily on providing college planning information to students and their families. District grant applications described a wide range of activities and services designed to address STAR's goals; however, in implementation, the project tended to focus on the provision of college readiness informational resources to students and their families. A substantially smaller number of activities addressed educator preparation, advanced academics, and family and community support. In their planning for 2007-08, district and campus staff indicated that they planned to increase their focus on increasing students' readiness for and access to advanced academics as well as the opportunities for educator professional development.

Confusion about roles and responsibilities limited first year implementation efforts. Across districts, administrators said that there was confusion about who was responsible for implementing STAR and misunderstandings about the project frequently occurred between middle and high school staff. In some districts, high school staff understood that their role in the project would not begin until 2006-07's seventh graders matriculated to the high school. Some districts were able to clarify matters by ensuring that administrators and counselors from both the middle school and high school participated in planning meetings and worked together to develop strategies for implementation.

Districts implemented a variety of instructional reforms concurrent with STAR. Representatives of several STAR campuses reported that they were overwhelmed by the number of instructional reforms implemented in their schools during the 2006-07 school year. Campuses that were able to identify a clear set of instructional goals and adopted initiatives in support of these goals experienced less frustration with STAR's first year implementation.

Informational Resources and Family and Community Participation and Support

The largest share—nearly 80%—of STAR districts' first year (2006-07) activities addressed informational resources, and the smallest share—less than 2%—addressed activities that engage greater family and community participation and support for schooling. To a large extent, this difference is a reflection of districts' pre-existing resources. Most districts had programs designed to provide information about college opportunities in place prior to the STAR grant, and it was a relatively simple step to expand these programs and the services they provide to encompass the broader college readiness goals of GEAR UP. Few districts, however, had programs to increase parent and community involvement or the expertise to develop such programs in place prior to STAR.

Districts implemented a wide range of activities and services designed to increase parent and student access to information about college during STAR's first year. All districts provided students and, in some cases, parents, with opportunities to visit area colleges, and all districts participated in career and college fairs. Some districts introduced new programs designed to better inform parents and students about educational planning. Such programs included regularly scheduled workshops addressing educational planning and home visits designed to reach out to parents who might not otherwise gain information about schooling.

Students said they were most likely to get their information about college from a family member. About the same proportion of middle school and high school students said they got their information about college from a parent or guardian (59% and 62%, respectively) and over 40% of both high school and middle school students said they got their information about college from another family member. Only 44% of high school students and 24% of middle school students said they had spoken about college with a school counselor, and 34% of high school and 36% of middle school students said that they had discussed college with a teacher.

In interviews, teachers said they assisted students in planning for college by providing sound instruction and by discussing college when the topic arose in class. Some teachers said they addressed college readiness through invited speakers and class projects that focused on the importance of college. Counselors acknowledged that they had a more formal role in providing students with information about college, but noted that college readiness sometimes took a back seat to more immediate counseling issues.

Parents and students have high educational aspirations. Fifty-six percent of middle school students and more than 60% of high school students expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree, and two-thirds of surveyed parents expected their child would earn a four-year college degree. More than half of high school seniors (54%) said that nothing would prevent them from attending college, and about 30% of parents felt their child would not encounter any obstacles to attending college.

Students reported familiarity with postsecondary opportunities and confidence in the affordability of higher education. More than three-fourths of middle school and high school students were familiar with four-year colleges and universities and community colleges, but less than half were aware of vocational or technical postsecondary educational options. This finding is somewhat surprising given the large proportions of STAR students enrolled in career and technology education programs. Similarly, parents and students expressed confidence in the affordability of postsecondary educational programs.

In spite of students' educational ambitions, relatively few high school seniors had taken the steps necessary to ensure college enrollment. At the time of the student surveys (May 2007), only 21% of surveyed seniors had taken the ACT and 11% had taken the SAT, although nearly half of seniors indicated that they planned to take the tests. Despite low participation in college entrance exams, 32% of STAR seniors reported that they had been accepted to a four-year college, 16% said they had been accepted to community college, and 5% had been accepted to vocational programs.

Parents reported that they talk with their children about college planning; however, most do not appear to use school personnel as a resource. Parents' responses to survey questions indicated that they are fairly active in discussing college plans with their children and in assisting students in selecting academic coursework. However, less than one-third of parents said that they communicated with school personnel about college topics, including financial aid and preparatory coursework, and a relatively large percentage of parents of high school students did not know their child's graduation plan (42%).

Overall, efforts to increase parent and the community involvement in STAR districts got off to a slow but promising start in 2006-07. STAR partner organizations FACE, NHI, and P²S² at Texas A&M Corpus Christi are expected to assist districts in providing services and support to prepare students for success in postsecondary institutions and to engage family, business, and community support for attending college. While most partnerships got off to a slow start, FACE had a strong presence in STAR middle schools during the 2006-07 school year, and many administrators and teachers indicated that FACE activities were the most successful events of the project's first year.

Advanced Academics and Educator Preparation

Research has established that a rigorous high school curriculum, including Advanced Placement (AP) coursework, is one of the strongest predictors of success in undergraduate programs, outweighing class rank and performance on standardized tests. As a result, there has been push to increase the number of low-income and minority students enrolled in AP coursework in order to improve the likelihood such students will achieve higher levels of educational attainment. However, the evidence resulting from such efforts suggests that the benefits of AP coursework accrue only to students who are able to pass AP exams and that there is little value in extending AP classes to students who are unprepared for challenging coursework or in watering down course content to ensure broader student participation. Thus, the challenge for STAR districts is to ensure that students' ability to participate in rigorous coursework results from increased academic preparation and not diluted course content.

In order to support teachers in improving students' academic achievement, GEAR UP partner the College Board offered professional development in vertical teaming to faculty on all STAR campuses in 2006-07. While the College Board's professional development curriculum is designed to instruct teachers in strategies that support students enrolled in AP coursework, the training is applicable to non-AP content and is offered to all core content area teachers.

Nearly half of middle school (48%) and 43% of high school students said they spent half an hour or less on homework each evening in 2006-07. And only 11% of middle school and 17% of high school students spent an hour or more on homework. Despite the lack of homework, students said they earned good grades. High school students reported an average GPA of 3.2, and more than half of middle school students (51%) said they earn "Mostly B's" or better.

In surveys, proportionately more middle school students reported they were taking pre-AP or AP courses than high school students (30% versus 21%). Across both middle and high schools, students' enrollment in pre-AP and AP coursework was concentrated in the core content areas. Notably few students were enrolled in pre-AP and AP Spanish language courses. This finding is surprising, given that 86% of students attending STAR campuses are Hispanic and nearly 40% of parents surveyed indicated that Spanish is spoken in students' homes.

Teacher participation in the College Board vertical team training varied across districts. Of the core content area teachers responding to the spring 2007 survey, 56% indicated that they had participated in training, and training participation was higher in middle schools (62%) than in high schools (52%). Differences in participation rates reflected the increased emphasis on STAR at middle schools, varying levels of administrator commitment to vertical teaming, and district concerns over lost class time and the need for substitute teachers.

Teachers who attended vertical team training were largely enthusiastic about what they learned and said that the opportunity to work with teachers from different grade levels was a central benefit of the workshops. Many teachers, however, voiced frustration that content area teachers from feeder pattern schools within their districts did not attend the same training events.

The implementation of vertical teams presented challenges to STAR districts. Scheduling team meetings was challenging because many core content area teachers did not share common planning periods, and communication difficulties between middle and high school teachers frustrated some team plans. Of the core content area teachers responding to the spring 2007 survey, only 44% said they were able to plan with their team (54% middle school and 38% high school), and 35% said they met with their team to write curriculum (32% middle school and 37% high school). In addition, weak leadership for vertical teaming, insufficient teacher preparation, and high rates of teacher turnover in some districts created implementation barriers.

Year One Baseline Indicators

In the year prior to the STAR grant (2005-06), students at STAR schools performed less well than students statewide on state assessment exams, AP exams, and college entrance exams. Students in 2004-05 graduated at the same rate as students statewide, and almost half of graduating seniors were enrolled in a Texas higher education institution in the fall of 2005.

All STAR districts were rated Academically Acceptable in 2005-06; however, students at STAR schools performed below statewide averages. STAR campuses' TAKS performance was below the state average in every subject tested. Differences in passing rates ranged from 6 to 26 points below the state average and persisted across grade levels and ethnic and economic comparison groups.

In 2005-06, only 13% of STAR students received credit for at least one AP course, and those students who participated in AP exams did not perform as well as students state- or nationwide.

Although AP course offerings varied by campus, STAR high school students were able to receive credit in one or more of 20 different AP courses. STAR students took AP exams in one or more of 23 subjects in 2005-06. The most popular exams were English Language and Composition (186) and English Literature and Composition (122).

Average AP exam scores for STAR students (1.43) were lower than state (2.58) and national (2.89) averages. Overall, the proportion of STAR AP exam-taking students who received a 3 or higher was less than the national average (11% versus 59%). Although less than 1% of STAR students took AP Spanish Language, the proportion of students who received a score of 3 or higher on this exam was higher than for any other subject tested (62%).

Students at STAR high schools graduated at about the same rate as students statewide (83% versus 84%) in 2004-05. Compared to state averages, a higher proportion of STAR students completed the 26-credit Recommended High School Plan (RHSP) (76% versus 72%). There was considerable variation in graduation and RHSP completion rates among the six STAR high schools, and some high schools had rates that exceeded state averages. Seniors at STAR high schools in 2004-05 took college entrance exams at about the same rate as seniors statewide (66% versus 67%); however, a substantially lower proportion met passing criteria (9% versus 27%).

Consistent with previous years, 47% of 2005-06 high school graduates at STAR schools were enrolled in a Texas postsecondary educational program in the fall of 2006. In the fall of 2005, 47% of 2004-05's graduating seniors were enrolled in Texas' higher education institutions, and in the fall of 2004, 48% of 2003-04's graduating seniors attended a Texas postsecondary educational program. About 30% of 2005-06's graduates enrolled in a four-year Texas college or university and 17% enrolled in a community college or technical school.