

# **TEXANS GETTING ACADEMICALLY PREPARED (TGAP)**



## **Year Six Evaluation Report Executive Summary**

September 2004 – August 2005

March 2006

Prepared for Texas Education Agency  
By  
Texas Center for Educational Research  
Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston

# Credits

---

## **Texas Center for Educational Research**

The Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) conducts and communicates nonpartisan research on education issues to serve as an independent resource for those who make, influence, or implement education policy in Texas. A 15-member board of trustees governs the research center, including appointments from the Texas Association of School Boards, Texas Association of School Administrators, and State Board of Education.

For additional information about TCER research, please contact:

Kelly S. Shapley, Director  
Texas Center for Educational Research  
12007 Research Blvd.  
P.O. Box 679002  
Austin, Texas 78767-9002  
Phone: 512-467-3632 or 800-580-8237  
Fax: 512-467-3658

Reports are available on the TCER Web Site at [www.tcer.org](http://www.tcer.org)

## **Contributing Authors**

Texas Center for Educational Research  
Kelly Shapley, Ph.D.  
Keith Sturges, MAA  
Daniel Sheehan, Ed.D.

Center for Public Policy  
at the University of Houston  
Gregory R. Weiher  
Christina Hughes  
Joseph Howard

## **Prepared for**

Texas Education Agency  
1701 N. Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701-1494  
Phone: 512-463-9734

## **Research Funded by**

Texas Education Agency

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

---

### **TEXANS GETTING ACADEMICALLY PREPARED (TGAP)**

---

The Texas Education Agency's (TEA's) state GEAR UP project—Texans Getting Academically Prepared (TGAP)—has provided interconnected activities supporting early awareness of and preparation for higher education among low-income and minority students, their families, and schools in six South Texas school districts. Over its six years, the state grant was guided by three goals for (a) building educator and student capacity for successful participation in challenging college preparatory programs, (b) increasing student and family awareness of opportunities for college and financial aid assistance, and (c) providing meaningful incentives and support for high student achievement from the business community.

TGAP represents an orchestrated partnership of the TEA, Texas A&M Precollege Outreach Centers, Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), AMS Production Group, and the six school districts. TEA coordinated the partnership and provided fiscal oversight while also ensuring the program goals were met. University outreach centers developed new college awareness programs for TGAP school districts. Project GRAD developed and implemented programs designed to enable students to achieve higher educational standards. AMS collaborated with TGAP staff to design products, such as inspirational and informative videotapes in order to disseminate GEAR UP information statewide. The participating school districts, all with concentrations of low-income, Hispanic students, are Alice, Corpus Christi, Jim Hogg County, Laredo, Robstown, and United ISDs. Nearly 16,000 students representing 15 campuses participated in TGAP.

#### **Evaluation Design**

The TGAP evaluation assessed progress toward the three overarching TGAP goals. Researchers explored (a) how TGAP influenced the capacity of districts, schools, educators, parents, and students to support students' participation in higher education; (b) the extent to which student and parent awareness of college opportunities, including financial aid and assistance, increased; and (c) the academic outcomes for schools and their students. The findings also offer insight into program implementation and sustainability.

Researchers combined qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches with rich and varied sources of data. These included annual, on-site interviews (with teachers, students, counselors, and university faculty fellows), classroom observations in Advanced Placement (AP) and Pre-AP classrooms, document and product reviews, interviews with project partners, teacher and student surveys, and demographic and performance data (e.g., Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), AP exam, ACT, and SAT scores; attendance rates; and course grades). The methodological approach relied on triangulation to examine patterns in both project implementation and academic outcomes.

## Major Findings

Evaluation findings are organized around the following core themes: building capacity, advanced placement programming, the Faculty Fellows program, student and parent services, school and student performance, and institutionalization and sustainability.

### Building Capacity in TGAP Districts

TGAP supported programs to build the capacity of participating schools, educators, students, and parents. These capacity building efforts were guided by district plans and supported by Precollege Outreach Centers (POCs) as well as the development of products for educators, parents, and students. For teachers, student preparation for higher education involved professional development on advanced academics and curricular alignment.

*The emphasis on TGAP-sponsored professional development for teachers decreased over time.* Although most teachers reported that participation in TGAP-sponsored professional development activities impacted their teaching, across years, there was a persistent decline in the number of teachers participating in professional development and a narrowing in the variety of offerings. In particular, teachers perceived strongest effects on instructional practice from events such as AP Summer Institutes and Building Success. Teachers expressed their appreciation for TGAP-sponsored professional development and shared a deep concern that ongoing training was vital to the institutionalization of TGAP goals.

Across grant years, the College Board provided training on AP vertical teaming and coursework. Even though many teachers attended AP training in year 6, there were only 43 *new* AP teachers trained (most represented two districts). During the six grant years, 513 teachers participated in TGAP-sponsored AP and AP vertical team training. Unfortunately, only about half of AP-trained teachers remained in the districts during the final project year. High teacher turnover, without ongoing professional development for new teachers, threatens the viability and continuation of AP and Pre-AP programs established in the districts through the TGAP grant. The available pool of teachers for advanced classes will continue to diminish over time unless districts train new teachers in AP strategies each year and/or implement strategies to retain AP-trained teachers.

*The priority of the AP Vertical Team concept declined over time.* The AP Vertical Team concept is central to ensuring that more students are able to access and succeed in AP programs. While TGAP aimed to build a cadre of teachers who would align the curriculum from grades 6 through 12, during the final two grant years, only one small district sustained vertical team training for teachers in core subject areas. While teachers on TGAP campuses perceive vertical teaming as valuable and at least somewhat successful despite challenges related to scheduling, lack of effective leadership, and insufficient or poor communication, vertical team meetings were infrequent.

*TGAP teachers seldom used EXPLORE and PLAN assessment data for diagnostic purposes.* While most teachers reported that they gave students advice (about careers, the Recommended High School Program, Distinguished Achievement Program, college admission, SAT/ACT, and financial aid), across years, most teachers either chose not to use data from these assessments or were unfamiliar with them. Instead, teachers frequently saw their role as one of encouraging

students to consider higher education, facilitating activities to raise awareness, talking about career paths, or referring students to outside sources of information.

*Although Precollege Outreach Centers provided important support for districts, personnel turnover diminished services, especially in the last year.* Across grant years, the POCs supported TGAP districts through activities such as arranging campus visits to colleges and universities, facilitating professional development for educators, making classroom presentations on financial aid and college admissions, and assisting with parent involvement programs. However, personnel turnover, especially in the final year, curtailed program continuity. The Alice POC discontinued operation toward the end of the school year, and at the Laredo POC, staffing changes disrupted services. Despite personnel issues, the outreach centers provided a reduced level of services in year 6.

### **Advanced Placement Program**

Increased student participation in advanced coursework is believed to be a potent method for reducing the ethnic and socioeconomic disparity of access to higher education. Research on first-generation college students highlights the vital role of rigorous high school courses. TGAP-sponsored professional development was designed to enable districts to assemble a cadre of teachers trained in AP methods, expand AP course offerings, and encourage more underrepresented students to participate in AP and Pre-AP coursework, as well as the AP examinations.

*TGAP enabled districts to serve underrepresented students in Advanced Placement programs.* Across program years, while TGAP campuses expanded AP programs by offering a wider array of Pre-AP courses, AP course offerings decreased. Student-level data for 2002 through 2004, however, reveal that more than one-fourth of TGAP eleventh- and twelfth-grade students were enrolled in at least one AP course, and more than one-fourth of all TGAP high school students were enrolled in at least one Pre-AP course.

*Both participation and performance in AP examinations decreased toward the end of TGAP funding.* Between 2000 and 2005, there was an 86% increase in the number of students taking AP exams in Texas, a 60% increase nationally, and an 83% increase on TGAP campuses. But, relative performance on the AP examinations at TGAP schools was consistently below state and national averages. For example, in 2005 the percentage of AP examinations with scores of 3 or higher was 59% nationally, 49% across the state of Texas, and 21% at TGAP campuses. Excluding the AP Spanish Language Examination, the percentage of AP exams with scores of 3 or higher was only 5% at TGAP campuses.

Also of concern were trends from the final two program years. Between 2003 and 2005, the percentage of students taking AP exams decreased by 20% at TGAP schools. Moreover, students who took AP exams completed fewer AP exams (19% less). During that period, the percentage of examinations with scores of 3 or higher fell from 30% to 21%. While declining performance may be expected with increased participation, it is unlikely with decreased participation. It appears that TGAP promotion of open-enrollment policies for AP courses and financial support for examinations enhanced student access through 2003. Students' AP examination performance

trends raise concerns about the academic preparation of TGAP students who are enrolled in AP coursework and the academic rigor of the AP and Pre-AP classes offered.

*Greater intellectual challenge is needed in AP and Pre-AP classes.* Although TGAP's investment in teacher professional development on AP and other advanced academic strategies appears to have positively influenced teachers' classroom practice to some extent, observations of core-content area AP and Pre-AP classes in TGAP schools revealed primarily teacher-centered instruction. Across years, teacher activities most frequently involved directing the whole group or monitoring students working independently. Likewise, students most often listened to a teacher presentation or completed worksheets. Students less commonly had assignments that involved problem solving, investigation, or written communication.

Comparisons over time did reveal slight increases in teachers' use of higher order questioning and AP learning strategies. During the final two project years, teachers were observed using higher order questioning strategies a small extent (a notable increase from little or none). In ratings of core-content classes on students' use of AP learning strategies, greater increases across years were observed in mathematics and social studies classes. Results for subject-specific indicators suggest that TGAP teachers use a small number of instructional strategies that were promoted through professional development.

Overall, classroom observations underscore the need for increased intellectual challenge of instruction and stronger student engagement in learning. Students in advanced classes spent substantial portions of class time passively listening to a teacher presentation rather than being actively engaged in meaningful and challenging learning experiences.

*Teachers expressed concerns about academic standards in AP courses.* While across years TGAP teachers were optimistic about their schools' AP programs and believed the AP program in their school was at least somewhat successful, teachers contended that opening AP enrollment to all students precipitated a diluted curriculum, which, in turn, contributed to poor performance on examinations. Teachers believed the AP program would be strengthened by implementing a more stringent enrollment policy, increasing course rigor, diversifying the curriculum, and meeting their professional development needs.

## **Faculty Fellows Program**

The Faculty Fellows program, a collaborative effort of the TEA, two universities (Texas A&M International University and Texas A&M University—Kingsville), and the six districts, aims to develop local capacity by supporting AP professional development through subject-area pairings of high school teachers and university faculty. The program also set out to increase student awareness and preparation for college by allowing students to have regular access to college professors and college-level instruction.

*The Faculty Fellows program has fostered stronger connections between the universities and high schools.* The teacher-professor relationships established through the Faculty Fellows program have helped form stronger links between TGAP high schools and neighboring universities. AP students and their teachers have had the chance to see the university and professors in a new and more realistic light.

*Faculty Fellows believed they had limited influence on AP exam success.* While most participating Faculty Fellows believed that increased academic rigor could be achieved, they contended that it was unrealistic to expect their brief time spent in AP classrooms to have a substantial impact on students' AP exam scores. Faculty Fellows advocated for more stringent student AP admission criteria and stronger curricular alignment between middle and high school.

*The Faculty Fellows program is unlikely to continue without external funding sources.* While Faculty Fellows and teachers said they wanted to continue participating in the program, university program coordinators indicated that, without additional external funding, universities would not be able to sustain the investment in Faculty Fellows provided by the grant.

## **Student and Parent Services**

In cooperation with Precollege Outreach Centers, TGAP schools hosted activities and events for students and parents. Each year, student activities included presentations on college and financial aid opportunities, preparation for higher education, and career exploration. Parent services, such as informational mailings and workshops, were designed to help parents encourage and aid students in their educational endeavors.

*More than a quarter of TGAP students visited a higher education institution in the final grant year—but, the provision of student services decreased over time.* About half of students at TGAP schools received at least one TGAP-related service in the final project year, representing a substantial decrease from previous years. In addition, 27% of students visited a university, college, or technical school during the final TGAP year, which is also a decrease from previous years. The decrease in student services in the final grant year may reflect the cancellation of campus visits for students, as well as the diversion of funds by some districts from college visits to salaries.

*TGAP raised parent and student awareness of post-secondary education opportunities.* Surveys indicated increases in the percentages of TGAP students who said they were familiar with community and four-year colleges. There also was an increase in students who said they received counseling about college costs and financial aid. In addition, more parents said that they received information about college entrance requirements and about finances. However, for information on both college requirements and financial aid, percentages of parents reporting they received information peaked in fourth year of TGAP and subsequently showed marked declines.

*TGAP had limited success in increasing parent involvement and raising student aspirations to attend college.* Parents in the final year were no more likely to help their children with homework or to talk to them about school compared to previous years. Furthermore, the percentage of students who believed it is very important to have a college degree did not increase.

*Involvement in TGAP activities is associated with the likelihood that parents will report that their children are going to attend a post-secondary institution.* Various forms of TGAP involvement, such as parent counseling about entrance requirements and financial aid or student participation in a college trip, predict a higher probability of surveyed parents reporting that their children will attend college. This impact is independent of student achievement, household composition, household socioeconomic status, and other variables. The greatest impact is experienced by disadvantaged students.

## **School and Student Performance**

*TGAP schools performed well on indicators of student preparation for post-secondary education.* These improvements, however, usually reflect increased participation rather than academic performance. The following list shows progress toward providing experiences that support student access to post-secondary education.

- Participation on college entrance examinations increased by 13% at TGAP campuses since 1999, compared to an increase of 6% at peer comparison campuses and to no increase at the state level.
- Performance on the SAT increased by 15 points between 1999 and 2003, compared to a 15 point decrease at peer campuses.
- Completion of the Recommended High School Program was greater compared to state averages between 1998 and 2003.
- Completion of advanced courses was higher than peer campuses and the state.
- Graduation from high school remained above peer campuses and the state average.
- Completion of GED increased slightly since 1999 while the state average and peer campus rates decreased slightly.
- Dropout was lower, with the rate for TGAP campuses in 2003 below the dropout rates for peer campuses and the state.

*TGAP campuses performed less well on key student academic indicators.* The following list suggests that, although student awareness of and access to higher education may be improved, their insufficient academic preparation undermines prospects for succeeding academically.

- Performance on AP examinations trails the state average by 28 percentage points and national average by 38 points in the final project year. When the Spanish Language Exam is excluded, TGAP performance trails Texas by about 44 percentage points and national by about 54 points.
- Participation and performance on AP examinations decreased since 2003.



- Performance on the SAT and ACT remains weak. Small percentages of TGAP students scored at or above the criterion on these tests in any year, and the percentage decreased from 6% in 2002 to 4% in 2003.
- Performance on the TAKS trails peer campus and state averages. In 2004, TAKS passing rates for TGAP campuses were lower than comparison groups (an average of 5 points lower than peer campuses and an average of 13 points lower than the state average).

While districts improved student participation in advanced programs, courses, and examinations, student academic performance did not improve. Districts must increase their efforts to improve conditions that support student performance on achievement measures such as the TAKS, AP examinations, and the SAT and ACT.

*The percentage of TGAP graduates entering higher education decreased.* Contrary to project goals, data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board show a 1.3 percentage point increase in TGAP graduates entering four-year universities in Texas between 2000 and 2004. During the same period, the percentage entering a community college or technical school declined sharply. The slight increased enrollment in four-year universities does not offset the drop in students entering community colleges or technical schools. Thus, the overall percentage of TGAP graduates entering higher education decreased over program years. In 2004, less than half of TGAP students (48%) entered a higher education institution in Texas.

## **Institutionalization and Sustainability**

If project activities are expected to be sustained after the grant funding cycle, the degree to which reform efforts' are internalized and institutionalized must be examined. Researchers examined districts' plans for future years and strides toward program sustainability after TGAP funding ends.

*Teachers' familiarity with TGAP decreased.* While teacher familiarity with the TGAP program increased from years one through five, it decreased substantially in the final program year. This trend corresponds with decreased levels of participation, since during the final two years, the percentage of teachers reporting participation in at least one TGAP event (e.g., attended professional development) also decreased.

*Student awareness of higher education may not be sustained.* With decreasing participation and familiarity, student awareness is unlikely to be sustained. Some teachers believed TGAP services help in encouraging students to enroll in academically challenging courses and participate in higher education. Other teachers, however, felt that TGAP was much less effective than it had been in previous years or that the program had no discernable impact.

*Testing and admission fees may not be sustained.* School counselors and TGAP coordinators cited successes relative to the provision of TGAP funds for college admission and AP tests, college application, dual-credit course enrollment fees, and college field trips. Without continued grant funding, however, TGAP districts did not have plans for covering these costs beyond the program.

*GO Centers may help sustain TGAP ideals.* Three districts established GO Centers (collaborations with local universities and high schools) in which a nucleus of students is trained and then disseminates information to other students about post-secondary education. GO Centers were funded, in part, with TGAP funds. The three districts using GO Centers planned to sustain them after the end of TGAP. The GO Centers represent the continuation of many of the purposes and activities of GEAR UP, particularly student outreach.

*Precollege Outreach Centers may not be sustained.* POCs provided services for TGAP districts across program years. In 2004-05 as the grant neared its conclusion, there was great turnover in POC staffing. According to teachers, the greatest effect was on classroom presentations and professional development. Without GEAR UP funds, it is unlikely that POCs will continue to provide support for TGAP districts.

*GEAR UP toolkits produced through grant funds offer a sustainable resource.* Over the course of the grant, TGAP produced informational toolkits. In year 6, all TGAP districts reported that they had received the toolkits. These toolkits provide informational resources that may be useful beyond the grant period in raising student and parent awareness of post-secondary education not only for TGAP districts but for districts statewide.

*TGAP sustainability is associated with cost.* In general, programs that do not require large out-of-pocket expenditures for the districts are expected to continue. Districts that held Walks-for-Success, for instance, are optimistic that those walks will continue. Additionally, in some districts, GEAR UP funding was used to train a cadre of Thinking Maps trainers—thus, training on Thinking Maps is self-sustaining. Programs with higher costs, such as college visits, professional development, Faculty Fellows, and fee subsidies for tests and concurrent course enrollment programs may be ended when grant funding ends. Many TGAP participants fear that the loss of GEAR UP funds also will jeopardize the programs that they view as most productive (e.g., college visits and funding for SAT, PSAT, ACT, THEA, and AP tests).