



Texas Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 2016–17 and 2017–18 Evaluation Report

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List of Acronyms Used in the 2017-2018 Evaluation Report

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
Charter Management Organization (CMO)
U.S. Department of Education (ED)
English Learner (EL)
End-of-Course (EOC)
Ordinary Least Square (OLS)
Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Professional development (PD)
Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) Professional Learning
Community (PLC)
Propensity score matching (PSM)
Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)
Quasi-experimental design (QED)
State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC)
Special education (SPED)
State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Texas Education Agency
(TEA)

Executive Summary

Background

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) awarded a five-year Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The grant is intended to increase national understanding of the charter school model by providing financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools; and by expanding the number of high-quality charter schools available to students. The grant program is also intended to increase understanding through an evaluation of the effects of such schools on student outcomes, staff, and parents. The federal grant guidelines allow for start-up funding not to exceed 18 months for planning and program design of the charter school and 24 months for the initial implementation of the charter school. In line with these requirements, TEA awarded sub-grants to 26 charter schools. The first cohort consisted of nine campuses that received funding from TEA from August 2016 through July 2018. Similarly, the second cohort of 17 campuses received funding from TEA May 2017 through July 2019.

Program Evaluation

In May 2017, TEA contracted with Safal Partners and their research partners Mathematica and Gibson Consulting Group to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Texas Charter School Program Start-Up Grant. Broadly, the purpose of the evaluation is to identify promising practices exhibited by charter school start-up grantees and established, high-performing charter schools across the state, examine student and teacher recruitment and retention strategies within the start-up grantee campuses, and assess the efficacy and impact of student enrollment in start-up charter school campuses.¹

The evaluation utilized a variety of data collection and analysis strategies to address the research objectives, including online surveys of charter school leaders conducted in spring 2018, interviews with charter school principals and teachers, and classroom observations conducted during the course of fall 2017 and spring 2018 site visits. In addition, TEA provided student-level, teacher-level, and school-level data, which was used to analyze the relationship between student enrollment at campuses funded through the Texas Public Charter School Start-Up Grant and academic outcomes for students. The findings in this report are based on an analysis of the 26 Cohorts 1 and 2 start-up grantee campuses and high-performing charter school campuses.

Promising Practices from Charter School Start-Up Grantee Campuses

Planning Practices

School leaders and teachers at new charter start-up grantee campuses shared a number of important aspects to getting their new charter school up and running, including:

- Developing processes that drive campus practices and norms, such as deciding upon day-to-day systems that match the charter school's model, increasing student enrollment through various methods, and holding meetings with various stakeholders to encapsulate the mission and vision for the charter school.

¹ Statistical models were used to assess the performance of a sample of 100 high-quality campuses based on standardized test scores (i.e., STAAR-Reading, STAAR-Mathematics for Grades 3–8, and EOC exam scores for Grades 9–12). Campuses ranked in the top half of the 100 high-quality charter school campuses were categorized as high-performing for the purposes of this evaluation. See Appendix A for additional detail on high-performing schools for the purpose of this evaluation.

- Establishing defined roles and responsibilities, and developing campus teams. Teachers noted the utility of a supportive system and the importance of creating a positive culture among staff to build a sense of community as critical to establishing a new campus.
- Receiving critical support from either their CMO or district office staff while planning a new charter school campus, and guidance from TEA for guidelines such as how to submit amendments for new items, guidance on how to spend funding, expectations for curriculum, information on the required number of school days, and other school-related policies.

Organizational Practices

The study explored a number of key factors related to start-up grantee campus school organization and management, including important practices related to the charter school campus mission, and parent involvement with the school and in their child's education. Key findings include:

- Principals rated the use of data to inform instruction and hiring exemplary teachers to support other teachers among the most important practices for executing their campus' mission.
- Principals rated the regular individualized teacher-parent communication and having a system for parents to monitor their students' progress among the most important practices for getting parents involved in their child's education.
- Principals felt that word-of-mouth advertising and online advertising about the school, and current teachers recruiting other educators were among the most effective teacher recruitment methods.
- When hiring new teachers, principals shared that strong pedagogical skills and fit with the educational philosophy of the school were the most important criteria.
- Principals rated providing teachers with regular feedback on their instructional practices and providing dedicated planning time were among the most important practices for retaining high-quality teachers.
- Similar to teacher recruitment, principals cited word-of-mouth advertising from parents of currently enrolled students as the most effective method for attracting students. The use of social media was a distant second in terms of effectiveness in this category.

Instructional Practices

After establishing effective organizational practices and methods for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, providing support for teachers is essential for charter campuses to deliver the highest quality of instruction possible to their students. Key findings related to instructional practices are as follows:

- Principals shared that the use of formative data to inform instruction and establishing a positive relationship between the teacher and student were among the most impactful instructional practices observed at their schools.
- Principals felt that providing feedback to teachers after walk-throughs or informal observations and reviewing student data with teachers were among the most impactful approaches for improving instructional practices.
- Overall, classroom observation scores were in the upper mid-range at charter school start-up grantee campuses, indicating relatively high-quality teacher-student interactions across multiple domains.

- Observations of classrooms at charter school start-up grantee campuses reveal that Emotional Support domain scores were higher at start-up grantee campuses than high-performing charter schools. Emotional Support domain scores at start-up grantee campuses may be indicative of teachers providing supports for students in at-risk situations.
- The Classroom Organization domain was significantly lower for teachers at start-up grantee campuses than it was for teachers at high-performing charter schools. This finding may be reflective of more experienced teachers working at high-performing charter schools and/or additional classroom management training or systems in place at high-performing charter schools.
- The use of in-class small group, differentiated, and individualized instruction, as well as the development of strong teacher-student relationships, were ranked among the most impactful approaches for closing the achievement gap for educationally disadvantaged students. These same methods, in addition to targeted pull-out instruction by an interventionist, were rated as most impactful for closing the achievement gap for low-performing students.

School Climate and Staff Morale

There is a wide array of factors that contribute to high staff morale and the development of a positive campus environment. The study examined the climate, staff morale, and teaching conditions at charter school start-up grantee campuses.

- Half of the principals at charter school start-up grantee campuses “strongly agreed” that teachers trust each other and trust their principal, and that there is an inclusive work environment at their school, while less than half of the principals “strongly agreed” that there is a culture of professionalism and staff morale is high.
- Principals shared that the most important indicators of a positive school climate include a culture of respect between students and teachers and genuine care for students.
- Principals rated clear behavioral expectations, the development of strong teacher-student relationships, and effective student engagement in the classroom as the three most impactful approaches for maintaining positive teacher-student and student-peer relationships.

Impact of Student Enrollment at Charter School Start-Up Grantee Campuses

This study estimated the effects of enrollment in a charter school start-up grantee campus on STAAR Reading, STAAR Mathematics, Algebra I EOC, and English I EOC exams. Students who attended charter school start-up grantee campuses during the 2016–17 school year were matched with students at traditional public school campuses in order to identify a group of students enrolled in traditional public school campuses who share similar prior test scores and other student and school characteristics. Statistical models that controlled for differences in student characteristics and prior academic achievement were used to estimate the effect of enrollment at a charter school start-up grantee campus on student academic outcomes.

At the elementary and middle school levels, there were individual charter school start-up grantee campuses that showed statistically significant differences, some positive and some negative, in STAAR Mathematics and STAAR Reading test results compared to matched students enrolled in traditional public schools, after controlling for student differences. However, there were no significant overall differences on average for STAAR Mathematics or STAAR Reading test results across the four elementary start-up grantee campuses or the six middle school grantee campuses in the analyses with matched

traditional school campuses. For Algebra I and English I EOC exams for students enrolled in the high school grantee campus, after controlling for differences in student and school characteristics, students enrolled in the campus showed statistically higher Algebra I and English I EOC exam scores, compared with matched students enrolled in traditional public schools.

When comparing the overall performance of start-up grantee campuses to the performance of students in different student groups, in most cases, the STAAR results for each student group are very similar to the overall results. The consistency of results across student groups indicates that the overall results are not driven by the performance of any particular student group.

An additional descriptive analysis of early elementary data found that, of the four charter school start-up grantee elementary campuses, three of the campuses had a lower percentage of students ready for Kindergarten compared to students in feeder districts. Feeder district is defined by where the students attending the charter school would have attended had they remained in traditional public schools; see Appendix A for details. These three campuses also had higher rates of eligibility for accelerated reading instruction compared to students in feeder districts.

Best or Promising Practices from High-Performing Charter School Campuses

The study utilized survey data collected from principals at high-performing charter school campuses and other established charter school campuses not identified as high-performing to assess differences in practices between these two groups of schools. Differentiating characteristics of high-performing charter schools were identified as potential best or promising practices that could be emulated by other charter school campuses across the state. These survey findings were further supplemented with interview data collected from school leaders and teachers at high-performing charter schools. The results are organized by organizational practices, instructional practices, and practices that contribute to the establishment of a positive school climate.

Organizational Practices

The study explored a number of key factors related to school organization and management, including the execution of the charter school campus mission, parental involvement, and the educational experience of charter school campus principals. Key findings are provided below.

- Although various practices, such as using data to inform instruction, monitoring through classroom observations, and maximizing instructional time, were identified as important to executing the mission of the school across all charter school campuses, the following differentiating practices were evident at high-performing charter schools:
 - Ensuring that clarity in the educational philosophy of the school is instilled in campus staff and teachers; and
 - Creation of a youth culture at the campus.
- Differentiating practices related to increasing parent involvement in their child's education that were apparent at high-performing charter schools include:
 - Holding parent-teacher conferences;
 - Organizing regular school-day events for parents to interact with their children;
 - Encouraging parents to attend meetings at the schools, conferences, open houses, and other campus events; and
 - Encouraging parents to participate in school fundraising events.

- Across all charter schools, using current teachers to recruit colleagues, using word-of-mouth advertising about the school, and holding job fairs were identified as the most effective teacher recruitment strategies which should be considered best practices. Differentiating practices that were apparent at high-performing charter schools include:
 - Using online advertising to recruit high-quality teachers;
 - Considering a teacher’s fit with the educational philosophy of the school; and
 - Considering a teacher’s fit with the mission of the charter school campus.
- Regardless of charter school classification, instructional effectiveness, classroom management, student engagement, student performance, and cultural fit with the campuses were identified as the most important aspects when deciding whether or not to retain a teacher. Principals at high-performing charter schools tended to rate student engagement as a more important teacher retention factor than principals at other charter school campuses.
- In assessing the most effective methods for retaining high-quality teachers, principals across all charter school campuses consistently ranked having smaller class sizes and providing regular feedback to teachers regarding instructional practices as the top two most effective approaches. Differentiating practices at high-performing charter schools also included the establishment of professional learning communities to improve instructional practices and collaboration.
- Recruiting and retaining students is a major challenge for all new charter school campuses. Word-of-mouth advertising from parents of currently enrolled students was ranked as the most effective recruitment tool across all school leaders. However, the effective use of open houses to bring the community into the school and introduce families to school leadership, teachers, and the educational philosophy of the school is perceived to be a more effective practice at high-performing charter schools than at other charter schools across the state.
- Regardless of whether a principal was at a high-performing school or another charter school campus, principals felt that building meaningful relationships between teachers and students, and establishing a safe and collaborative environment at the campus were the top two most effective methods for retaining students. Differentiating practices at high-performing charter schools include:
 - Student-centered instruction; and
 - The use of multiple instructional approaches to meet the academic needs of students was an effective student retention strategy.

Instructional Practices

The study explored best or promising practices related to instructional practices and teacher supports and how various approaches may differ across high-performing and other charter schools. Key findings are provided below.

- The establishment of positive relationships between the teacher and student was reported to be the most frequently observed instructional strategy by all charter school principals. Principals at high-performing charter schools placed more emphasis on the following practices than their peers at other charter schools:
 - Maximizing learning time;
 - Creating opportunities for meaningful peer interactions; and
 - Effective scaffolding.

- Across all charter schools, principals tended to rank some of the same teacher support approaches among the five most important (e.g., reviewing student performance data with teachers, coaching support feedback after observations, PLCs), but principals at high-performing charter school campuses tended to be more data-focused than their peers at other charter schools as they also used student achievement data to gauge the performance of teachers.
- For high-performing charter school campuses, average classroom observation scores for the “Emotional Support”, “Classroom Organization”, and “Student Engagement” domains were in the upper end of the mid-range of teacher-student interaction scores, which reflect effective teacher student-interactions across multiple domains of instruction.
- The average observation score for the “Instructional Support” domain also fell in the mid-range of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) teacher-student interaction scores, but it is important to note that, historically, teachers tend to score substantially lower in this domain. Observations at high-performing charter campuses reflect a reasonable degree of rigorous, high-quality instruction.
- All charter school principals felt that establishing strong teacher-student relationships and connections and using various forms of in-class and out-of-class academic interventions were impactful approaches for closing achievement gaps for educationally-disadvantaged and low-performing students. The following practices for closing achievement gaps have emerged as being more prominent at high-performing charter schools than other charters across the state:
 - The use of special education;
 - Differentiated instruction in class;
 - Individualized instruction in class; and
 - Communications with parents about their child’s performance.

School Climate and Staff Morale Practices

Many factors contribute to a positive campus environment, which can impact teacher collaboration, continuous improvement of instructional practices, and the retention of teachers and students. The evaluation examined the climate, staff morale, and teaching conditions at high-performing and other charter school campuses.

- Principals at high-performing schools were much more inclined to “strongly agree” that staff morale is high at their campus, that teachers trust their principal, and that teachers trust each other.
- A higher percentage of principals at high-performing charter school campuses were also in strong agreement that their campus has an inclusive work environment, that a high value is placed on teamwork and collaboration, and that there is a culture of professionalism at their school more often than school leaders at other charter schools.
- Across all charter school principals, they consistently agreed on important approaches to maintaining a positive school climate, such as campus staff sharing a common set of beliefs about schooling, genuine care for students, a culture of respect, and academic growth of students. However, the following differentiating characteristics of high-performing charter schools emerged as best or promising practices through the analyses:
 - Campus staff sharing a common set of beliefs about schooling and learning; and
 - Socio-emotional growth of students.

- Principals at high-performing and other charter school campuses were in agreement that developing strong teacher-student relationships, effectively engaging students in the classroom, and having clear behavioral expectations were the three most impactful approaches to maintaining positive interactions between teachers and students and among students. However, the following differentiating approaches were evident through principal survey data at high-performing charter schools:
 - The use of proactive steps to curb misbehavior in the classroom; and
 - The establishment of strong anti-bullying policies.

Summary of Key Findings

This evaluation report is the first in a series of annual reports related to the Texas Public Charter School Program Start-Up Grant. The findings in this report shed light on the planning, organizational, and instructional practices of new charter schools. In future reports, school practices will be monitored as the grantee campuses mature into their second, third, and fourth years of operation. The Year 3 evaluation report will include an additional 11 charter school campuses — bringing the total to 37 for the 2018–19 school year.

Results reveal some key differences in the characteristics of students enrolled at charter school start-up grantee campuses, as well as the experience level of teachers employed at these campuses when compared to matched traditional public school campuses. Findings related to school outcomes that represent an exploratory examination of the academic impact of a student enrolling at a new charter school are also presented in this report. While the research methods are rigorous, the short operation time of these campuses suggests that these results should be interpreted with caution. Lastly, the examination of organizational practices, instructional practices, and practices related to maintaining a positive school climate in place at high-performing and other charter schools reveal a wide array of approaches that can be considered promising practices for potential replication at other charter school campuses across the state.