

The 2016–17 High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant: The Road to Quality in 10 Texas Districts and Charter Schools

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	1
Summary of Key Findings.....	2
Background on the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant	3
Overview of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Study Project.....	5
Case Study Sampling Procedure	5
Study Design.....	6
Participants	6
Data Collection.....	7
Approach to Data Analysis and Reporting.....	7
Case Study Data Analysis	9
Classroom Walk-Throughs	9
Staff Interviews and Teacher Focus Groups	14
Use of Grant Funds to Enhance High-Quality Prekindergarten.....	14
Implementation of High-Quality Prekindergarten Priorities	16
Family Engagement Strategies.....	17
Progress Monitoring	20
Professional Development.....	22
Sustainability.....	25
Conclusions	27
Limitations.....	28
References	29
Appendix A. High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Project Overview	30
Appendix B. Administrator Interview Protocol.....	32
Appendix C. District Staff Interview Protocol	36
Appendix D. Teacher Focus Group Protocol.....	40
Appendix E. Classroom Observation Protocol	43
Appendix F. Site Visit Schedule.....	48

Tables

Table 1. Language and Communication Domain	11
Table 2. Physical Development, Health and Wellness, and Fine Arts	13

Figures

Figure 1. Classroom Environment.....	10
Figure 2. Mathematics, Science, and Technology	12

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Summary of Key Findings

In partnership with the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at American Institutes for Research initiated the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant case study project in fall 2016. The goal of the project was to gain a clearer understanding of how a sample ($N = 10$) of grantees prioritized funding within their prekindergarten classrooms to increase quality.

The research team conducted site visits to 10 districts and charter schools that collectively educate more than 18,000 four-year-old prekindergarten children each school year. The site visits included the following:

- Interviews with administrators and district-level staff
- Focus groups with prekindergarten teachers
- Classroom observations of up to three high-quality prekindergarten classrooms per district or open enrollment charter school

Overall, the grantees reported that the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant had the potential to produce significant impacts on their prekindergarten programs. New investments were made in multiple areas of the prekindergarten programs, including providing new resources for the classroom, increasing teacher knowledge and skills in early childhood education, increasing access to more prekindergarten children, lengthening the school day, and developing family engagement plans to bring families in more closely as partners in their children's education. Although the grant provided guidance on quality components that must be included in a high-quality prekindergarten classroom, it also gave grantees the ability to prioritize funding based on the unique needs of the teachers and children in their particular classrooms.

Although the grantees used some of the funding to provide new resources for prekindergarten classrooms, the grant helped them make a significant investment in their teachers. With increased teacher qualifications being a requirement of the grant, districts and charter schools chose to use grant funding to provide teachers with targeted training in early childhood education. These trainings included but were not limited to topics on child development, effective teaching strategies for young children, and the use of progress monitoring to drive instruction. Because of the increased emphasis on professional development, teachers reported that they felt more strongly connected and aligned to the larger K–12 education system in their respective districts, and prekindergarten, in general, was now recognized as an integral part of that system. Furthermore, the grantees indicated that the priorities of this grant (e.g., a focus on progress monitoring, alignment of the curriculum to the revised *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* [Texas Education Agency, 2015], family engagement activities, increased teacher qualifications, and a committed effort to maintain lower student-to-teacher ratios) were in line with the priorities of the district or charter school, and the grant provided the necessary fiscal and regulatory support needed to achieve those priorities.

The grantees also used grant funds to increase access to prekindergarten programs for eligible 4-year-old children. One study participant, a charter school, was able to open new prekindergarten classrooms at two campuses where prekindergarten was not previously offered. This initiative allowed the charter school to implement four half-day prekindergarten classrooms, each serving 20–22 children. Other grantees reported that they were able to increase the length of the prekindergarten day from half-day to full-day programming, which, in turn, gave teachers more time to deliver high-quality prekindergarten instruction and school readiness support to their children. One district was able to maximize its use of grant funds in expanding its prekindergarten program by partnering with the local YMCA to open five brand new full-day prekindergarten classrooms—an endeavor that serves an additional 110 eligible children.

Grant funds also were used to develop family engagement plans that promote communication and partnership between teachers and families. All the grantees reported that they used grant funds to support new initiatives to help parents become more knowledgeable about their prekindergarten child’s learning and how they can support academic growth at home. Specifically, the participants described how they share easy, practical activities for families to do at home to help their child build academic skills. In addition, family engagement efforts focused on bringing families into the school in a more systematic, intentional way through parent volunteer programs, after-school gatherings, and content-specific events, such as “math night.” One district worked with families, teachers, and community stakeholders to develop a home visiting program that allows prekindergarten teachers to meet with families and their children in their own homes to discuss a child’s learning and developmental needs. The grantees shared how iPads were purchased with grant funds and then used to videotape prekindergarten teachers teaching lessons that are then emailed to families so they can see what their child learned in school so that they can expand on that learning at home. Overall, the goal of all these efforts was to bring families into the schools as partners in their children’s education.

Most importantly, all grantees reported a need for continued funding for the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. Districts and charter schools reported needing more time to fully implement quality and measure the effectiveness of their programs. The case study participants also expressed concern that maintaining the target student-to-teacher ratios and added support staff salaries (teacher aides, family engagement specialists, and instructional coaches) will be difficult—if not impossible—to sustain without continued funding. Finally, the grantees felt strongly that more time and continued funding would be needed to fully implement high-quality prekindergarten, increase the kindergarten readiness of their children, and continuously improve their prekindergarten programs.

Background on the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant

During the 84th Texas Legislative session, the legislature passed House Bill 4, which provided a High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant program for districts and open enrollment charter schools to implement increased quality standards in their prekindergarten classrooms. The legislature appropriated \$118 million for the grant in the 2016–17 General Appropriations Act. TEA used

fiscal year 2016 to plan and award the grants. Schools implemented the high-quality program in fiscal year 2017 (TEA, 2016).

To be eligible for grant funding, a district or charter school must have submitted an application in spring 2016 and agreed to the following:

- Use a curriculum aligned with the revised *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2015).
- Increase prekindergarten teacher training or qualifications.
- Implement progress monitoring.
- Assess and provide kindergarten readiness results.
- Develop quality family engagement plans.

Each district and charter school awarded the grant received \$734 per eligible prekindergarten child for use during the 2016–17 school year. Funding was based on the 2015–16 prekindergarten enrollment in grantee classrooms of approximately 159,000 eligible 4-year-old children.

Future funding for the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant will depend on appropriations made in the 2018–19 General Appropriations Act. This grant funding is in addition to the half-day Foundation School Program funding of approximately \$3,650 per eligible prekindergarten child that is already provided to districts and charters to provide half-day prekindergarten.

Overview of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Study Project

The overarching purpose of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant case study project was to explore how 10 grant recipients used the grant funds to enhance their prekindergarten programs. The case studies examined district and school staff perceptions of the grant and how the grantees used the funds to enhance the school readiness of eligible children, developed or refined family engagement plans, and increased the accessibility and types of professional development available to prekindergarten teachers. The case study project employed a qualitative research methodology and was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How are the case study sites using grant funds to support the delivery of high-quality prekindergarten?
2. What priorities do the case study sites have for implementing a high-quality prekindergarten program?
3. How have the grantees used progress monitoring results to improve instruction and engage families as educational partners?
4. What family engagement strategies are being implemented as a result of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant?
5. According to the case study sites, what aspects of delivering high-quality prekindergarten will be unsustainable without continuation of House Bill 4 funding?
6. How are the case study sites using grant funding to increase prekindergarten teacher training or qualifications?

In addition, the case study protocols were designed to capture any emerging topics or themes identified by the participants as essential elements of implementing a high-quality prekindergarten program.

Case Study Sampling Procedure

In October 2016, the research team developed a strategy to identify a representative sample of grantees from across Texas. Consideration was given to the region and geographical location of the grantee (i.e., rural, suburban, or urban) and the size of the grantees' prekindergarten programs. In addition, the research team reviewed the applications of grant recipients to identify unique and innovative practices that the grantees planned to implement in the 2016–17 school year. Using this information, the team narrowed the case study sample to 10 districts and open enrollment charter schools (eight traditional districts and two charter school programs).

Study Design

In October 2016, superintendents of the 10 districts and charter schools who were identified as potential participants were sent an e-mail invitation to join the study. The invitation included a brief project overview (see Appendix A) that explained the purpose and activities of the study. After a grantee agreed to participate, the research team conducted an introductory phone call with the district or charter school superintendent (or their designee) to discuss the site visit and answer any study-related questions. The study protocols (see Appendices B–E) were shared with the participants, and a date for the site visit was identified. Each call lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The research team conducted the following data collection activities during each site visit:

- Administrator interviews
- District-level staff interviews
- Focus groups with prekindergarten teachers
- Classroom walk-throughs of high-quality prekindergarten classrooms

Protocols for each activity were co-developed with TXCC and TEA team members (see Appendices B–E). The open-ended administrator and district-level staff interviews and teacher focus group questions were designed to engage participants and encourage them to share their district’s priorities, goals, and activities pertaining to implementation of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. The classroom walk-through protocol was developed using the revised *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2015) as a framework for identifying practices that are consistent with high-quality school readiness practices.

Participants

The participants in this study included members of the grantee leadership team—including the principals at most sites, one or two central office administrative staff members (e.g., early childhood coordinator or director, assistant superintendent, or instructional coach), and certified prekindergarten teachers assigned to the classrooms identified by the district as recipients of the grant funding.

Snapshot of the High Quality Prekindergarten Grant:

- 603 districts and open enrollment charter schools applied for the grant.
- 599 districts and charter schools were eligible to receive the grant funding.
- 573 districts and charter schools accepted and received the grant funding.
- 4 entities that applied were ineligible because they were not approved to provide prekindergarten.
- 26 districts and charter schools declined the funds.

Case Study Participants:

- Alief ISD
- Dallas ISD
- El Paso ISD
- Harmony Public Schools–Austin
- Hidalgo ISD
- Lancaster ISD
- McAllen ISD
- North East ISD
- Promise Community School–Houston
- Tyler ISD

Data Collection

Data collection activities took place on-site at the campus or campuses where the grant funding was being used in high-quality prekindergarten classrooms. Most site visits were conducted by two research team members: one team member from TXCC and one team member from either TEA or the regional ESC. Two of the site visits, however, included three team members: one team member each from TXCC, TEA, and the regional ESC (see Appendix F).

Team members visited a maximum of three prekindergarten classrooms during each site visit. Only prekindergarten classrooms that the grantees identified as recipients of the grant funds were included in the classroom walk-throughs. When a grantee had more than three high-quality prekindergarten classrooms, the research team asked the district to identify three classrooms to participate in the classroom walk-throughs.

The administrator interviews, district staff interviews, and teacher focus groups were each approximately 1 hour in length. School leaders selected the participants for each interview and focus group meeting. The research team divided the data collection duties as follows: the TXCC team member served as the meeting facilitator and asked the questions and probes, and the TEA or ESC team member took detailed notes. The teacher focus groups were limited to 10 teachers, but most groups included 6–8 teachers plus the site visit team members. Interview and focus group meetings were audio recorded for the purpose of obtaining a written transcript to aid in data analysis. Participants were assured that audio recordings would be destroyed at the conclusion of the study, and individual's names would be redacted from the report to help ensure the quality of responses and the comfort of the participants.

Approach to Data Analysis and Reporting

The research team analyzed the staff interviews and teacher focus group responses using NVivo qualitative software specifically designed for use with qualitative, or open-ended, data. The transcripts of the administrator and district staff interviews and the teacher focus groups were coded according to the following major themes identified with TEA:

- Knowledge and understanding of the grant objectives and requirements
- Perceptions of the elements necessary for the implementation of high-quality prekindergarten
- Priorities for the district's prekindergarten program
- Implementation of the High Quality Prekindergarten Grant
- Family engagement strategies
- Progress monitoring
- Professional development for prekindergarten teachers and staff
- Sustainability of high-quality prekindergarten program initiatives

In addition, the team coded open-ended comments about the importance of high-quality prekindergarten and identified other themes that emerged from the data analyses that had not been previously considered when developing the coding structure.

The results of the administrator and district-staff interviews were aggregated across the 10 case study sites. Similarly, data from teacher focus groups and the classroom walk-throughs were aggregated accordingly. This process helped identify communalities across the sites, overarching themes, patterns, and outliers.

Case Study Data Analysis

Classroom Walk-Throughs



During the site visits, the research team conducted walk-throughs of prekindergarten classrooms. Twenty-four classrooms from 10 sites (eight traditional public districts and two open enrollment charter schools) were observed. The classrooms observed were identified by district staff as being high-quality and receiving financial support from the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant in the form of classroom materials, staffing, or other direct funding from the

grant. The walk-through protocol included 32 observable items from the eight major domains in the revised *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2015). The eight domains are as follows:

- Classroom Environment
- Language and Communication
- Mathematics
- Science
- Technology
- Physical Development
- Health and Wellness
- Fine Arts

For each observable item, the site visit team checked whether the item was “observed,” “not observed,” or “no opportunity to observe.” The team selected “observed” when classroom evidence showed that the item was present. For example, “observed” was selected for “Classroom materials and learning centers are labeled” when labels were on the materials and in the learning centers. The team defined “not observed” to mean no evidence of the item was present in the classroom. “No opportunity to observe” was selected when the possibility existed that the item might be present at other times, but the observer was unable to verify such during the visit. For example, if the visit occurred during a time when the teacher was not reading a book to the class, but the daily schedule indicated that time was allocated in the day for whole-group book reading, and books pertaining to the domains in the checklist



(such as mathematics) were evident, then the observer would select “no opportunity to observe” for “Teachers use book reading to reinforce math concepts such as patterning, counting, and shapes.” To simplify the presentation of the results, the percentages of classrooms in which the items were “observed” during the classroom visits are shown.

For analysis, items marked “observed” were converted to a 1 and items marked “not observed” or “no opportunity to observe” were converted to a 0 so as to calculate the percentages of prekindergarten classrooms where each item was observed. Of the 32 classrooms walk-through criteria, 28 items (88%) were observed in more than 50% of the classrooms. Effective classroom environments were observed in the majority of the classrooms, except for four classrooms where we did not observe time for small-group instruction as reflected in the posted daily class schedule (see Figure 1). The other domain in which most of the items were observed was language and communication (see Table 1). Slightly fewer items were observed in the physical development, health and wellness, and fine arts domains (see Table 2), with the least amount of evidence for the mathematics, science, and technology domains (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Classroom Environment

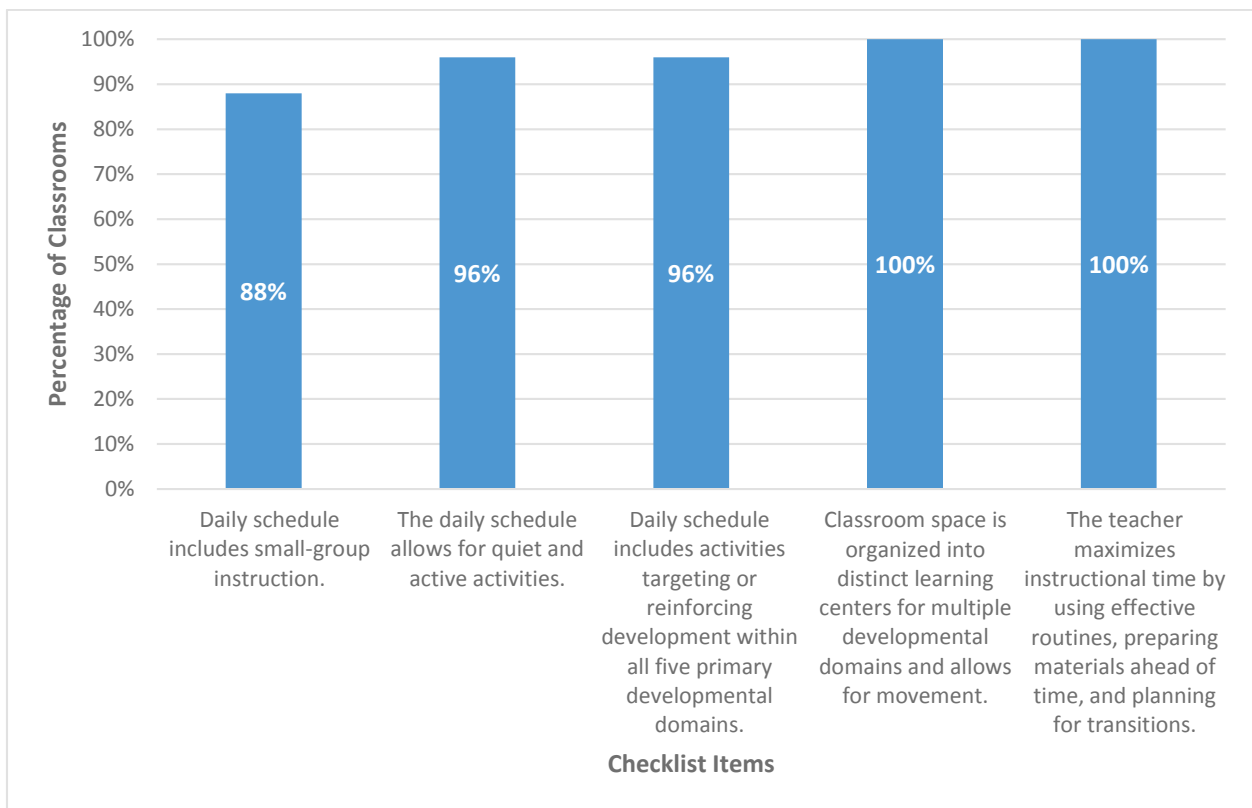


Table 1. Language and Communication Domain

Classroom Walk-Through Items	Percentage of Classrooms Observed
Teachers use children’s names frequently and speak to children at their eye level.	100%
Alphabet activities are evident (e.g., letter wall sequenced from A to Z, activities using children’s names, and theme vocabulary).	100%
Classroom materials and learning centers are labeled.	96%
Back and forth conversational exchanges occur between teachers and children.	92%
A variety of age-appropriate books are available.	92%
Management charts, such as classroom rules, the daily schedule, attendance, helper duties, and the activity center organizer, are posted.	92%
Teachers name/label various items and specific parts of objects and speak in complete sentences when addressing children.	88%
Teachers scaffold children’s language and encourage conversation.	88%
A variety of children’s work, including writing samples, are displayed.	75%
Teachers model writing and emphasize concepts of print, such as “thinking out loud.”	75%
Shared writing activities (e.g., class-made books and graphs) are evident.	67%

Figure 2. Mathematics, Science, and Technology

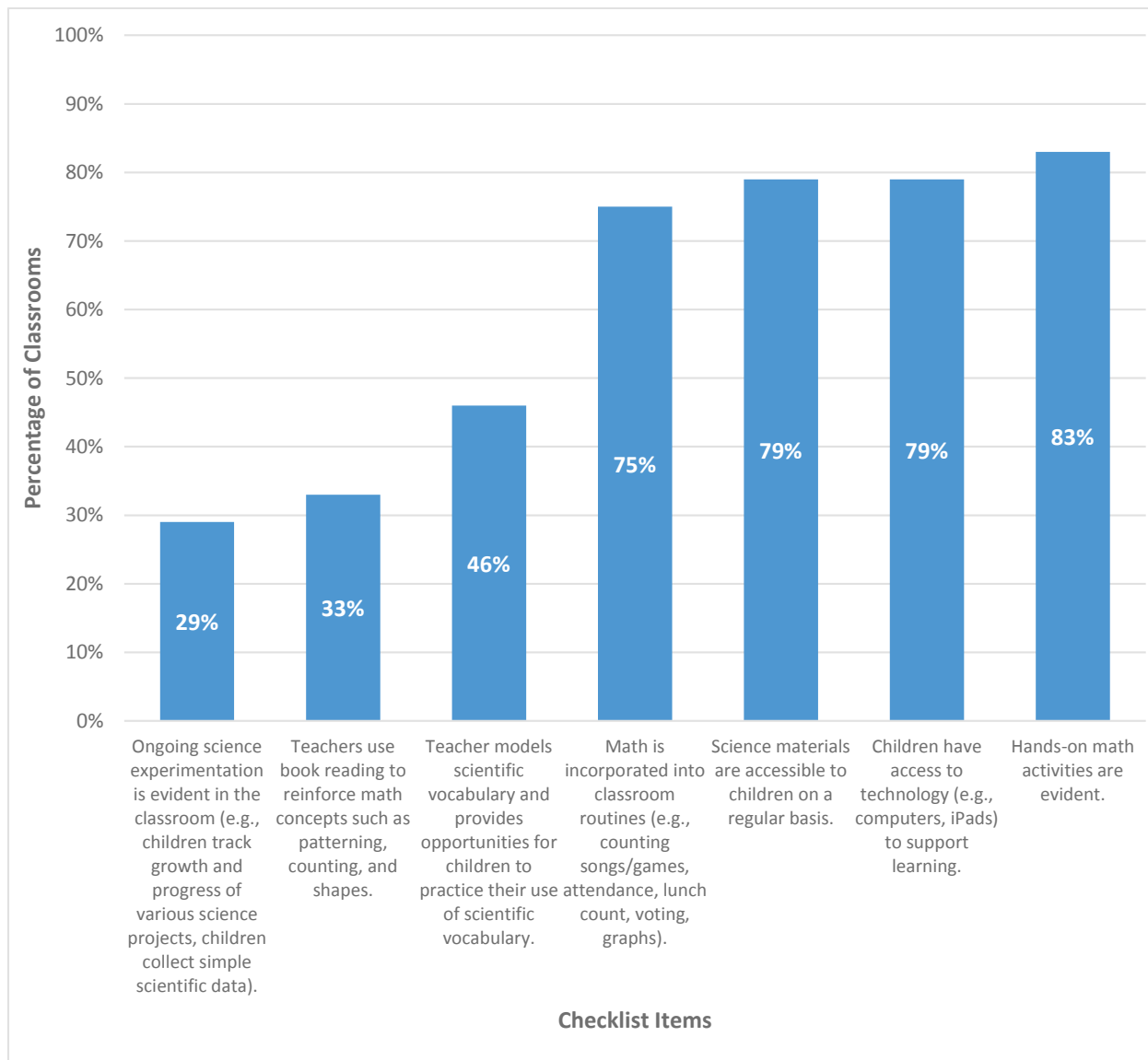


Table 2. Physical Development, Health and Wellness, and Fine Arts

Classroom Walk-Through Items	Percentage of Classrooms Observed
The daily schedule includes multiple opportunities for gross and fine motor skill development.	92%
Teachers model positive interactions and problem-solving techniques.	88%
Teachers respond promptly and sensitively to children using verbal and nonverbal techniques.	88%
Children have access to a wide variety of materials for sensory play and exploration.	83%
Teachers use positive guidance techniques to encourage children to regulate their own behavior.	83%
Children have opportunities for self-expression through art, music, or other means.	79%
Teachers assist children and use strategies for appropriate behaviors and interactions.	67%
Teachers help children label their feelings and talk with other children and the teacher.	50%

The classroom walk-throughs provided opportunities for the site visit team to observe first-hand how the grant funds were being used in classrooms. In particular, the team was able to see prekindergarten children using new classroom supplies, equipment, materials, and technology purchased with the grant funds.

Additional information about the implementation of the grant was gained through the administrator and district staff interviews and the teacher focus group meetings. The results of these face-to-face sessions are discussed in the next section.

Staff Interviews and Teacher Focus Groups

Use of Grant Funds to Enhance High-Quality Prekindergarten

The study participants spoke about the critical importance of high-quality prekindergarten educational experiences to increase the kindergarten readiness of children, especially children from low-income homes. Many of the staff interviewed mentioned how school staff, especially teachers in kindergarten and first grade, noticed the differences between children who attended prekindergarten and those who did not. The participants attributed the differences, in part, to how districts prioritized things such as staff professional development, the implementation of aligned curricula, and the use of data derived from progress monitoring to inform planning and instruction. The use of grant funds is helping grantees make strategic and intentional improvements in all aspects of program delivery.

Several participants described how the grant funding helps their district provide prekindergarten to English learners who, because of their limited English proficiency, enter kindergarten behind their non-English learning peers. Interviewees identified the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant as an investment in their children and the district.

In addition, staff interviews and teacher focus groups revealed that the grant funds were used as follows:

- Develop a new prekindergarten program (no prekindergarten program prior to receiving the grant).
- Expand half-day prekindergarten to a full-day program.
- Hire certified lead teachers who meet the requirements outlined in the grant guidelines.
- Hire teacher aides to help meet the goal of 11 children to one certified teacher or teacher aide.
- Provide professional development to teachers and staff.

“A good foundation is essential to success in the upper grades. There is a big difference [between] students that went to prekindergarten and the ones that never go to prekindergarten.”

—Teacher, Alief ISD

“I always use that word *investment* in particular because it is what it is. We are investing not only in the individual student’s future but we’re investing in the district’s future, to help those [students] financially and academically. I think the more we can all come to consensus on that, the better. The grant has been helpful in getting people to talk about this [high-quality prekindergarten] more than they probably were in the past, but it [the grant] also made really pivotal and critical financial commitments to districts.”

—District Administrator,
Dallas ISD

- Purchase and implement an approved prekindergarten curriculum.¹
- Purchase and implement an approved progress monitoring instrument.²
- Purchase new classroom equipment, resources, and technology.
- Hire family engagement specialists or other school-based staff responsible for implementing the district’s family engagement plan.

District staff discussed how funding from the high-quality grant provided a great amount of flexibility to meet their children’s and community’s needs. Some districts, such as the Harmony Public Schools–Austin, developed a new prekindergarten program. They are now able to serve up to 88 eligible prekindergarten children who would otherwise be unable to attend prekindergarten. Others (e.g., Tyler ISD and North East ISD) expanded their half-day programs at several campuses to full-day prekindergarten programs. One district, El Paso ISD, formed a partnership with the local YMCA to open five new full-day prekindergarten classrooms—an increase of 110 eligible children served.

Many participants reported that the funding allowed them to purchase curricula that were better aligned with the revised *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2015) and implement a more rigorous progress monitoring tool than they had previously used. The majority of staff interviewed felt strongly that the grant funds would improve their prekindergarten programs overall, which, in turn, would improve student outcomes and develop more school-ready learners. As a teacher at McAllen ISD reported,

“We want to close the achievement gap between our affluent students, English speakers, and our low-income English language learners. Because, of course, as you know the criteria to quality for prekindergarten is very specific. And, we know that we need to provide students those opportunities that they don’t get at home, that we need to create those opportunities and those environments in our school. With the grant, we were able to do all that, because, of course, we’re offering a great curriculum, excellent professional development, all the resources and the tools. That, to me, is the most important thing, closing that gap and providing that early literacy as early as possible . . . Because we know [from the] research that our English language learners or economically disadvantaged students tend to fall behind their counterparts . . . so those are our priorities.”

—Teacher, McAllen ISD

¹ Grant recipients were able to purchase curricula that is on the Commissioner’s List of Approved Prekindergarten Curriculum (see https://tea4avfaulk.tea.texas.gov/ematevi/EMATREPORTS/RptInst/EM_CURR_ADPN.pdf).

² Grant recipients were able to purchase a progress monitoring instrument that is on the Commissioner’s List of Approved Student Progress Monitoring Instruments.

Now they've [Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines] been updated to 2015, so the stakes are a lot higher for our prekindergarteners. Before, in 2008, they [the children] only had to be . . . aware of the information and have knowledge to some regard on different topics. Now they have to have mastery. So, a lot more is being asked of our little

“It was very important to us to not view the grant as a stand-alone initiative. It’s something that has to be folded into our day-to-day work and our strategic plan for our early learning [program]. That’s something that’s really important to me as a leader, is to not have so many ancillary things on the fringes, but how does this sort of fit within the core of what we’re doing . . . For us, the grant has the same two priorities. It’s how do we improve the quality of our classrooms and instruction across the entire district in line with the philosophy and a path that we had set already and how do we take this opportunity to rethink, and we did rethink and we may have that conversation a little bit later, our role with families and our role within the community and what that looks like. I think the grant’s priorities and our priorities as a district go hand in hand.”

—Principal, Dallas ISD

learners, early learners. We see a need, a high need. Do we have the resources to be able to address our new *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines*? And there was a big gap there that we didn’t have the resources [before receiving the grant].

Implementation of High-Quality Prekindergarten Priorities

Interviewees and focus group participants stated that a high-quality prekindergarten program was a priority for their districts. As previously reported, the majority of the interviewees identified high-quality prekindergarten as necessary to close achievement gaps between children from low-income families and their peers from higher income families. Many participants said that a high-quality prekindergarten program provides a strong foundation so that children are ready academically and physically for kindergarten and later grades. The participants described how the grant presented an opportunity for their districts to fulfill priorities for prekindergarten, and, in fact, they believe they won the grant because their district priorities closely aligned with those of the grant. For example, one Alief ISD district staff member reported as follows:

We know how important early childhood is, and our superintendent has been very, very focused on this as our priority for our district. We knew we needed the funds to improve our prekindergarten program. We have a great program, but we needed to make a better one. A huge chunk of our money and our funds are going into creating equitable classrooms because prekindergarten usually is sort of overlooked.

Another participant, a principal at a Lancaster ISD campus, said, “Once we saw it [the high-quality grant application] written, we were just ecstatic that it matched so closely with the path that we were already taking as a district.” These findings suggested that the districts were able to fulfill or expand on their priorities for prekindergarten in part because the grant guidelines were in tune with the indicators, priorities, and goals that are needed to implement a high-quality prekindergarten program.

The staff and teachers discussed how the high-quality prekindergarten grant specifically allowed their districts to accomplish the following priorities:

- Alignment of the prekindergarten curricula and the progress monitoring tool with the revised *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2015)
- Vertical and horizontal alignment across prekindergarten classrooms and between prekindergarten and K–12
- A goal of 11 children to 1 certified teacher or teacher aide
- Increased prekindergarten teachers’ knowledge and skills
- Development and implementation of a family engagement plan that results in greater family involvement and positive family attitudes toward education

“I have never seen so many parents as this year. That’s really good, and [parents are] actually involved in working in the school with us.”

—District Staff, Hidalgo ISD

At some campuses, teachers had been using curricula and student assessments that were a compilation of many different tools or instruments and did not yield useful information pertaining to children’s school readiness and academic needs or did not provide guidance on meeting children’s learning goals. Grant funds helped ensure that what was being taught in the classrooms and how children were assessed provide good predictors of overall school readiness.

Some participants also noted how the grant allowed them to focus on aligning prekindergarten classrooms across the district. One Hidalgo ISD district staff member said, “Any child can go to this school, to another school, they’re going to see the same things.” The participants also shared how they are now structuring professional learning communities for their prekindergarten teachers to include kindergarten and later grade teachers to improve vertical alignment from one grade level to the next. The grant is allowing districts and open enrollment charter schools to take a more holistic approach to delivery of prekindergarten services.

The later sections of this report discuss how case study participants implemented their priorities focused on improving family engagement, progress monitoring, and teacher knowledge and skills.

Family Engagement Strategies

One of the core objectives of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant was for districts to develop a plan to engage families. Interview and focus group participants at many of the case study schools cited family engagement as a necessary element of high-quality prekindergarten education. Teachers, administrators, and district staff agreed that it is essential that student learning not be limited to the school building. For example, one respondent from Promise Community Schools said that parental involvement is a

Really, really important part of prekindergarten. It’s important to train the parents about how to enhance their children’s education and how to carry those messages. It’s important for the schools to have that kind of connection with the parents so that

they're sure that what they're teaching in the classroom is followed up with at home. That kind of connection is incredible.

Although the grantees unanimously agreed that family engagement is important, the grant provided financial support for districts to dedicate time and effort toward improving their family engagement efforts. A participant from McAllen ISD said that it is “very, very important that we involve the parents, that we have a strong partnership with our parents, because we need their support. We can't do it without their support.”

This section first details several family engagement strategies used by the grantees and then describes ways the grant was used to engage prekindergarten children's families. Finally, perceived changes in family and parental involvement from select districts are shared.

Similar to other aspects of this grant, the grantees had many ways to meet the family engagement guidelines. The interview and focus group participants described a wide variety of creative strategies being used to engage prekindergarten children's families. At both Hidalgo ISD and Alief ISD, participants reported that they planned and facilitated new prekindergarten-specific parent nights to introduce academic concepts and teach parents specific activities they can do at home to help their child achieve school-readiness goals, such as letter recognition, counting, and other learning goals. Participation levels for these events was high—higher than in previous years. The grantees attributed the increase in participation to the use of grant funds to purchase supplies for the events, take-home books and materials for parents to use with their child, preparation and participation pay for staff to plan and implement the family nights, and pay for specialized strategists or staff to coordinate the events according to the identified needs of prekindergarten children.



“Prekindergarten has their own individual nights with the parents. We just give them tools, and resources, and do exactly what we do in the classroom with the parents . . . We have events, and [parents] show up in large numbers because they're very interested in hearing what [prekindergarten teachers] have to say.”

—Teacher, Alief ISD

Some districts used the grant funds to pay for staff, whose job was to support and facilitate family engagement activities. For example, at El Paso ISD, participants reported that every elementary school in the district has a campus-based parent liaison who provides services specific to the school in which the liaison operates. One important aspect of the parent liaison's job is to identify the types of family supports that are most beneficial, such as providing books and learning materials for home use, holding parenting

seminars or workshops, or providing opportunities for parents to volunteer in the classrooms. These are just a few of the ways that schools are connecting with families. For example, at Tyler ISD, one teacher provided take-home books for her children. She said,

I have Book Buddies, and I get these books at yard sales . . . [Children] cannot read them, but it encourages the parents to read it, because I'm not for sure how many books they have at home. The children get to choose whichever two they want each week and take it.

Participants across the case study districts reported leveraging the grant money to reach out to families and increase parent involvement in a variety of ways. The following are some examples shared by the participants:

- One respondent from Lancaster ISD said that the district adopted “a parent component” as part of their CIRCLE assessments, where teachers “inform the parents where the children are at [academically]. That’s something we didn’t do before. The parents are aware of what the student needs, and they can help us at home as well.”
- Grant money at Lancaster ISD also was used to purchase iPads for every prekindergarten classroom, and a teacher reported using them to engage parents.
- At Dallas ISD, grant money has been used to establish a partnership with the Teacher Home Visiting Project, which trains teachers and provides them with the tools to conduct home visits with families. In addition, the new Frog Street curriculum purchased with the grant money has “given us a lot of new parent involvement ideas. Frog Street [has] come up with a lot of good parent involvement that we added with their newsletter, parent home projects, things like that. That’s been helpful.”
- At North East ISD, grant money was used to hire two family specialists who attended the CIRCLE training. The specialists

[Took] that training and turn[ed] it around for parents to help [them] understand what’s developmentally appropriate, how do you help your child at home, those kind of pieces in addition to ESL [English as a second language] classes or CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] classes or other types of classes that they [the district] would be providing.

“With the purchase of new iPads, the children can take pictures of things that they’ve done in the classroom and send it to their moms to show them what they’re doing. We use that a lot, daily.”

—Teacher, Lancaster ISD

- Teachers in Tyler ISD and Lancaster ISD expressed that they wanted to share materials with children’s families for years but were previously unable to because of a lack of funds. During one site visit, a respondent explained,

What’s changed is that now with the grant money, we were actually able to purchase books to send out to our kids. Each of our children will be receiving three books with an actual list of ways to read with [their] child.

Although districts were still working to establish measures for parental involvement and family engagement, several shared stories of the changes they have seen since receiving the grant. Hidalgo ISD created a designated committee—Family and Community Engagement—that the participants credited with increasing parent involvement. In addition to curriculum nights and student-of-the-month assemblies, parents can now sign up to volunteer in prekindergarten classrooms. As one participant from Hidalgo said, “I have never seen so many parents as this year. That’s really good, and parents are actually involved in working in the school with us.”

Parent involvement can be tracked online in a designated Family Space.

At Harmony Public Schools–Austin, teachers can track parent involvement online in a designated Family Space. Parents can download books, play games, and do activities with their children. Teachers are able to track their progress and see at a glance that families are logging into the online portal and using the family engagement resources. As one Harmony Public Schools–Austin

prekindergarten teacher said,

The parents are always telling me how much they love [Family Space]. [If] they don’t know what do to with their kid, at least there’s this program here that’s going to help them, do that for them. It’s very easy for the parents.

At North East ISD, staff and teachers talked about how the grant funds had allowed them to expand parent access to the Ready Rosie program so that all parents of prekindergarten children in the district could receive tips on activities to do at home with their children to increase school readiness.

Several case study districts said that although their family engagement plans were still works in progress, they felt optimistic about the level of enthusiasm their district and school staff have generated concerning family engagement at the prekindergarten level and agreed that should the grant continue, they would continue to focus funding in this area.

Progress Monitoring

The High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant guidelines required recipients to implement progress monitoring as a means for measuring school readiness.

Similarly, the case study participants identified progress monitoring as a key component of their implementation of a high-quality prekindergarten program. A respondent from Dallas ISD said that district staff prioritized “using progress monitoring tools to guide the instruction that is developmentally appropriate, [which] is going to give us the information that we need or that teachers need to be able to make an impact on student learning.” Teachers, school administrators, and district staff collectively agreed that having an age-appropriate assessment was an essential tool

“[An] element of highly quality prekindergarten will be the assessment, which, in the past, it was a modification of what they have for kindergarten, first, second, and it was modified to work for prekindergarten, which was totally unacceptable.”

—District Staff, Alief ISD

for monitoring children’s progress—a sentiment that was echoed throughout site visits.

Eight of the 10 case study districts use the Children’s Learning Institute’s (CLI) CIRCLE Progress Monitoring System (formerly known as C-PALLS+) to monitor children’s progress and development. Although some districts, such as Dallas ISD and El Paso ISD, were using the CIRCLE assessment before receiving the grant funds, others, such as Lancaster ISD, adopted the tool to meet the grant requirements. According to staff from several districts, the CIRCLE assessment helped districts monitor children’s progress and make necessary adjustments to instruction or resources to meet their individual needs. For example, a respondent from Lancaster ISD said the district is using the first cycle of CIRCLE assessment results to talk

[T]o each team of prekindergarten teachers. “Pull up your grouping tool. Let’s look at who in your classroom it has under each skill. Now let’s look at the resources it gives you to intervene in that skill. Now let’s talk about your classroom day. Where and when are you going to embed this small-group instruction? You have way more kids on your list than you can possibly touch. How are we going to prioritize who gets what?”

Some districts are combining data obtained through CIRCLE with other assessment data to monitor children’s progress. At Dallas ISD, staff use the assessments provided through the Frog Street curriculum combined with anecdotal notes to make sure children are mastering skills in



mathematics, science, vocabulary, and writing. Promise Community Schools uses Teaching Standards GOLD and COR Advantage to monitor student learning. Interview and focus group participants from Promise Community Schools appreciated the flexibility COR Advantage offers:

I really like Core Advantage. . . . I find it really hard to take anecdotes when I’m teaching; it’s very easy when I’m in small groups, so that’s something that I love about Core Advantage [is] it isn’t just my anecdotes, my admin[istrator] could walk in and write an anecdote, my aide can do anecdotes when she has a small group and also when I’m teaching.

COR Advantage offers staff at Promise Community Schools the option to aggregate multiple data sources for one child and better understand his or her learning. Harmony Public Schools–Austin also uses COR Advantage, which one participant described as follows:

Really age appropriate for prekindergarten. I really like the scale that they break it down to, like what’s expected of a 2- or 3-year-old, then going into preschool age and prekindergarten age 4 and 5 into kindergarten, it shows that there’s so many different levels in that age range.

As a result of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant, some participating districts expanded their use of an instrument they were already using, such as the CIRCLE assessment. A participant at Dallas ISD said the district had

Previously been using CIRCLE as a progress monitoring tool. We weren't using all of the elements of CIRCLE that the grant is asking for so that's really the change from last year to this year, is making sure we're hitting all five of those domains in progress monitoring. That's really the biggest shift when it comes to progress monitoring for us.

Similarly, staff at El Paso ISD noted that they expanded their use of CIRCLE to include more developmental domains, whereas previously they used only the writing, language and communication, and mathematics components. Some districts selected an entirely new progress monitoring instrument to meet the grant requirements and gain a better understanding of student learning.

Although the districts were still assessing the results of their progress monitoring efforts at the time of the site visits, several were able to share success stories that they attributed to the grant. For example, one participant from Hidalgo ISD said the adoption of the CIRCLE assessment had inspired teachers to request more teaching resources, including additional professional development. Similarly, Dallas ISD staff reported that the progress monitoring standards adopted as part of the grant facilitated conversations about prekindergarten learning:

We feel like we're able to utilize the data that we used to have conversations with the specialists, to have conversations with teachers and then also have conversations with administrators and all the way up to executive directors in our district to talk about the impact and getting towards a threshold and what that means for children getting closer to kindergarten readiness.

Several participants said that although it is still too early to report results of their progress monitoring efforts, they expect to see growth for their prekindergarten children. For example, one Promise Community Schools staff member said that they "could tell that teachers are really getting what they're putting in, it's very good things for us to typically see, [compared to what] we have in the past." Participants also stated that if the funding is continued, they look forward to expanding their progress monitoring efforts.

Professional Development

The participants stated that the availability of funds for professional development is a significantly positive result of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. Interviewees emphasized that all levels of employees—teachers and district leaders alike—benefited from increased professional development activities.

According to the participants, the most commonly noted change in professional development was that funding was made available to focus on best practices for teaching prekindergarten children. Until this year, teachers reportedly had to participate in trainings pertaining to older students that could not necessarily be applied to their prekindergarten children because of developmental differences in ages and abilities. In the districts where specialists were hired with grant funds, teachers now have the added benefit of one-on-one coaching sessions to improve their teaching practices and increase their knowledge about the learning needs of

prekindergarten children. The majority of the case study districts reported that the grant enabled them to send more prekindergarten teachers to early childhood-specific conferences than in previous years. Similarly, the number of trainings offered within each district increased dramatically this year because of the additional funds. Regarding access to professional development, one Alief ISD teacher described the difference this year compared with previous years as having gone “from zero to a hundred.”

Types of Professional Development Offered

The types of professional development opportunities being funded through the grant varied greatly and included workshops, webinars, conferences, and one-on-one coaching on a wide range of topics. Funds were used for registrations to attend professional development events, salaries for specialists to deliver tailored training to teachers and paraprofessionals, and substitute teachers to relieve lead teachers so that they could participate in training. The following is a partial list of the myriad types of professional development funded by the grant:

- Dr. Marion Gibbs training on motor development for prekindergarten-age children
- Teachstone Coaching and Professional Development and Jim Knight coaching programs
- R. T. Garcia Winter Literacy Conference
- Action-based learning emphasizing fine motor skills
- Setting up classrooms as positive environments
- Handwriting Without Tears
- Apple software training and Google sites for use with new technology
- CLI and CIRCLE assessment training
- Kindermusik
- Schoology, a new technology platform that allows teachers to join multiple groups
- Professional learning community webinars on classroom management
- District-developed “content nights” to help teachers prepare for upcoming teaching units
- STEM in prekindergarten
- Use of progress monitoring instruments

“The grant gave us the opportunity to really jump into two critical areas. We’d already begun trying to change the mindset in the district about whom you need to hire to teach prekindergarten and the kind of personnel that we need in those prekindergarten classrooms. This grant gave us the opportunity to really start to shore up what quality personnel we have in those classrooms through the professional development aspect of the grant. Because the grant says, ‘Well, you have to have 150 hours over 5 years of these specific kinds of trainings,’ now the people who are responsible for hiring are beginning to go, ‘Oh, we really do need to be cognizant of who we put in the prekindergarten classrooms. We can’t just have a warm body.’”

—Principal, Lancaster ISD

- Gifted and talented training for prekindergarten teachers
- Esperanza for starting readers, a Spanish curriculum that also detects dyslexia
- Heggerty Phonemic Awareness training
- Alternative seating and other classroom management techniques to improve the learning environment for prekindergarten children

One grantee, Promise Community Schools in Houston, allocated a portion of its grant funding to support prekindergarten teachers in obtaining the Child Development Associate's (CDA) credential. In fact, all certified prekindergarten teachers earned the CDA this school year. The CDA addresses a core set of child development and early education competencies that will further support teachers' knowledge of teaching at this grade level. Teachers from Promise Community Schools indicated that the use of grant funding for this purpose was significant because of the targeted nature of the training, and they [teachers] viewed this as beneficial to children and families alike.



Teacher and District Staff Perceptions of Professional Development

Teachers and district staff agreed that the professional development funds were well spent. When talking about the place and accomplishment of professional development, teachers, administrators, and district staff said things such as the following:

- They could have training specific to their profession “because we finally have the funding to provide the opportunities that we’ve been trying to do for three years.”
- The content nights made it possible “to make sure teachers are aware of all of the key milestones in that unit and can prepare lessons to accomplish those.”
- Regarding professional development in general: “The great thing is that everybody in the district is doing the same thing. It’s not just one campus. Everybody’s getting the same training. We’re all on the same page. It’s helping all our students throughout the district.”
- Long-term implications are possible because “we get these kids really well wired so they’re ready for print and ready for mathematics, conceptual thinking.”

Teachers, administrators, and district staff from the case study districts collectively reported improvement in professional expertise and practice directly attributable to the grant funding that was directed toward professional development. The teachers spoke of “finally being

treated as if they were professionals because they had the proof of their profession in the training they received.”

Sustainability

The issue of sustainability was in the minds of the case study districts even as they wrote their grant applications. They considered what expenditures would result in new resources that would remain in the district beyond the grant period, and they considered the inclusion of salaries for new staff positions that would then become district’s responsibility thereafter. Many additional items were identified beyond those two categories.

Many expenditures paid by the grant were for items that will remain “intact” after the first grant year ends, such as technology, equipment, learning centers, new curricula, and new progress monitoring instruments, as well as any professional development needed to use these resources. Although most districts have additional items, such as books that they would purchase with continued funds, the presence of these first purchases was needed and welcomed.

District-level staff and administrators who added specialist-level positions and family engagement specialists or parent liaisons to support prekindergarten teachers expressed a commitment to keeping those positions to continue coaching and providing workshops and trainings targeting the needs of prekindergarten teachers. The specialists quickly became assets to both teachers and administrators who then knew their teachers were getting top-quality guidance and training within the district. One principal credited a grant-funded prekindergarten strategist with providing invaluable support to “guide us through the assessments that we’re going to be using” but also expressed concern about how the district would continue to fund this critical support position in lieu of additional grant funding.

Sustaining professional development is a key concern across the districts that participated in the case study project. With budgets that are already tight and pressure mounting to sustain staff positions created with grant funds, professional development that is specifically geared for prekindergarten teachers may be cut or abolished altogether. The district staff, administrators, and teachers have already seen benefits in classrooms from the new knowledge teachers gained this year. As one district staff member said,

We’re trying to do a lot with raising our own knowledge level and that of our teachers, but sometimes you do need to hear from Marion Gibbs who really understands how all that motor development translates into wiring the brain for print and literacy, and for mathematical concepts, and that costs money.”

“This is my biggest fear with not knowing if we’ll have recurring grant funds. It is the family engagement aspect. We won’t not have family engagement work going on, but it’ll be very limited, only able to touch a few places in the district, and not make the impact that we wanted to make. We also won’t be able to continue to explore different types of programs with families. I find that to be devastating.”

—Administrator, Dallas ISD

Another area of concern at some districts was that they might lose their family engagement activities, which generated a great deal of enthusiasm in schools.

Teacher and District Staff Perceptions About Sustainability

Teachers and staff talked about the changes at their school with regard to increased professionalism of prekindergarten as an education program in the school and district instead of an afterthought—as was sometimes the case in previous years. The majority of the participants identified family engagement, in particular, as greatly increased this year because of the grant.

“Maybe two years down the road, three years down the road, but, if you pull the rug on funding right now, we’re just getting momentum going. I think it’s important to sustain the tremendous gains that we think we made this year.”

—District Staff, Alief ISD

With overall regard for the continuation of the grant, one staff member said, “The hope is that it [prekindergarten] will grow exponentially because we do have parents that are really excited about what’s happening, and teachers are excited about what’s happening.”

At the same time, it should be noted that districts did not generally seem to expect unending assistance in the form of this grant or any other; rather, they talked in terms of hope for a few more years of financial support while they fully establish new programs and find other means of absorbing the

additional costs into district and school budgets.

Conclusions

The findings from the case studies of the 10 districts in Texas that received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant show how additional funding can improve the implementation of prekindergarten programs. The districts that participated in this study used the funds to improve their curricula, progress monitoring, teacher quality, family engagement strategies, resources, and classroom environments. The teachers, school administrators, and district staff interviewed all spoke about the need in their communities to provide high-quality prekindergarten to eligible children. They discussed how a high-quality program, especially one that is full day, has a strong and positive impact on children by preparing them for kindergarten and later grades. The staff interviewed discussed how high-quality prekindergarten closes achievement gaps between children from lower income families and their peers from higher income families. Many mentioned how high-quality prekindergarten also is critical for English learners by providing an early introduction to the English language. As research has shown, high-quality prekindergarten increases school readiness by promoting young children's academic skills in literacy, mathematics, science, language, communication, and nonacademic skills (e.g., gross and fine motor skills and understanding school routines and expectations). All these skills are key to a child's development and success in school and beyond.

Although the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant is a good first start, one round of grant funding is not enough time for districts to fully implement high-quality practices that will yield lasting changes and school readiness outcomes for Texas' youngest learners. It is a good start, and teachers have only just begun to implement practices learned through participation in professional development. Furthermore, new curricula, materials, and progress monitoring instruments are, in most cases, just being deployed in many of the classrooms served by the grant. Family engagement activities that aim to improve relationships between school and home and encourage families to become actively involved in their child's educational experiences are just being implemented and will take time to fully mature into sustainable programs that will yield truly positive results. Teachers who participated in the focus group sessions reported feelings akin to acceptance and pride in "finally understanding their contributions to the overall education of the youngest learners in their schools."

Limitations

The data collected for this study indicate that the 10 districts and charter schools that participated in the case study used the funds to make specific and beneficial enhancements to their prekindergarten programs. However, this is a small sample of the overall number of grants distributed. The 10 districts and charter schools selected for participation in this case study project are diverse in terms of geographical location, school size, and school type (traditional public and charter schools), but the schools are not statistically representative of the entire population of prekindergarten programs across Texas. To present a statistically accurate representation of the entire population of prekindergarten programs that received the grant, a larger sample size of grant recipients would be needed, which is beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, the findings presented in this report are not generalizable beyond the 10 schools included in this study and are not intended to represent all districts and charter schools that received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. Instead, the findings of this report present the ways in which these 10 entities chose to use the funding to improve, enhance, and support the delivery of prekindergarten educational services to eligible children.

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Appendix A. High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Project Overview



TEXAS COMPREHENSIVE CENTER

High Quality Prekindergarten Case Study Project Overview

Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to better understand how districts prioritized their High Quality Prekindergarten Grant funding and to highlight successes in Texas prekindergarten classrooms.

This project is being conducted through a partnership between the TEA, the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at American Institutes for Research (AIR), and 10 Texas school districts and charter schools. Staff from the Education Service Centers will provide assistance to the case study team as well.

Project Components:

- **Site Visit** – We will work with each school district to identify a convenient day/time for 2 members of the case study team to visit the school. The case study team consists of 1 person from TEA or a representative from the Education Service Center (ESC) in the region and 1 person from the TXCC. Depending on the size of the district and the personnel structure of the district, we would like to conduct the following activities during the Site Visit:
 - **High Quality PreK Classroom Walk-Throughs:** Case study team members will conduct classroom walk-throughs to identify and document high quality preK teaching practices. We would like to see only the classroom(s) you have identified as 'high quality' based on the grant guidelines.
 - **PreK Teacher Focus Group:** Case study team members will meet with preK teachers to discuss their understanding and implementation of high quality teaching practices. Focus group discussion questions will be standardized for all participating school districts. Sample questions for the Teacher Focus Group include:
 - How has your school's family engagement program changed since your district received the High Quality Prekindergarten Grant?
 - In your own words, what do you think are the necessary elements for a public prekindergarten to be high quality?
 - Please describe your school's priorities for implementing a high quality preK program. Who sets these priorities? How are they communicated to you?
 - **District Administrator Interview:** Case study team members will meet one-on-one with the district administrator responsible for oversight of the High Quality PreK Grant to discuss the district's short- and long-term goals for implementation of the grant and use of grant funds to improve preK student outcomes. These will be standardized interviews that are exactly the same for all participating school districts. Sample Administrator Interview questions:
 - It's my/our understanding that your district applied for the High Quality Prekindergarten grant in 2015. Were you a part of that process? Please describe your involvement with the district's application for the High-Quality Prekindergarten grant.
 - Please describe your school district's priorities for implementing a high quality preK program?
 - Why did your district apply for the High Quality Prekindergarten grant funding?
 - **District Personnel Interview** – Case study team members would like to meet one-on-one

Administrator Interview 2

with any other district-identified staff person who has direct knowledge of the implementation of the grant (i.e., the Early Childhood Program Director). This may interview may not be necessary or implemented in all district site visits.

Sample Site Visit Schedule – The following is an example of a typical Site Visit though there may be some variation in this schedule depending on the size of the district, number of interviews conducted, and number of classrooms observed.

8:00 – 8:30 am	Arrival, introductions, overview of the visit
8:30 – 9:30 am	Administrator Interview
9:30 – 10:30 am	Classroom Walk-throughs
10:30 – 10:45 am	Break
10:45 – 11:45 am	Teacher Focus Group
11:45 – 12:45 pm	District Personnel Interview (if applicable)
12:45 – 1:00 pm	Wrap-up
1:00 pm	Departure of Case Study team

Participant names and classrooms will not be identified in the final report. Teachers and administrators may elect not to answer questions if they choose. Please note that the intent of this project is to learn more about Texas’ high quality prekindergarten classrooms. *It is not a monitoring or compliance activity and participation is purely voluntary.* You may choose to decline this invitation. We will give you the interview questions in advance of the visit, there are no right or wrong answers and participants may choose to decline to answer any question.

After site visits, researchers will process interview data into a comprehensive report that highlights effective practices from all participating school districts. The final report may be distributed to policymakers and others who are interested in the success of preK in Texas and will be available to you and your staff.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Key Contacts for this study:

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Appendix B. Administrator Interview Protocol

High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Studies Project

Administrator Interview Protocol 2016-2017

Hello, my name is _____. First, I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Studies Project is to learn from district and school staff about their perceptions of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant program, how they are utilizing the funding, and about the challenges and successes districts and schools have experienced as participants in the grant program.

My organization, the Texas Comprehensive Center at the American Institutes for Research, is collaborating with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to conduct this study. In addition to your program, we are visiting 10 other Texas school districts and charter schools. We chose districts based on their geographic region in the state and the size of their prekindergarten program. Our goal is to have a diverse sample of school districts and charter schools that can provide valuable information about how they utilizing the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant funds.

I want to reassure you that your responses are confidential and will not be identified as belonging to you. There are no right or wrong answers; we want to learn from you! Please be honest when considering your answers. I would like to audio record this session so that I can focus on your answers and have an accurate record of your comments for analysis later. After I take notes from the recordings I will delete the audio files.

School name: _____

Names, roles/position of each participant:

First, I would like to know about your understanding of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant.

1. To start, will you tell me a little bit about your background and your role at [SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME]?
2. It's my/our understanding that your district applied for the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant in 2015. Were you a part of that process? Please describe your involvement with the district's application for the High-Quality Prekindergarten grant.
3. In your own words, what do you think are the necessary elements for a public prekindergarten program to be high-quality?
4. Are you familiar with the grant's objectives? If yes, please describe your understanding of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant objectives. [IF THEY ARE NOT FAMILIAR, WE CAN SHARE THE OBJECTIVES AND ASK THEIR PERSPECTIVE OF THE OBJECTIVES.]
5. Please describe your school district's priorities for implementing a high-quality preK program? [Probe: How were your districts priorities determined?]
6. What do you think about those priorities? How, or in what ways, do your district's preK program priorities align with the grant's objectives?"
7. Of the staff at your district, who would you say is primarily responsible for implementing a high-quality preK program? Of the staff you mentioned, what are their responsibilities in regard to the district's preK program?

Now we're going to dig in a little bit into the preK program at your district.

8. Why did your district apply for the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant funding?
9. Are all of your elementary schools participating? [IF THEY SAY NO, ASK HOW THEY IDENTIFIED SCHOOLS THAT ARE PARTICIPATING].
10. How is your district implementing the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant? [Probes: What programs, curricula, or other activities have been added to your district's preK program since your district received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant?]
11. Why did your district decide to use the funding on [INSERT ANSWER, COULD BE CURRICULA, HIRE TEACHERS, HIRE AIDES, PD, ASSESSMENTS, FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?]
12. Has your school district used the grant funds to hire new staff? If so, what positions were added and how do those new positions support the implementation of a high-quality preK program?

Next, I would like to inquire about your school district's family engagement activities.

13. Please describe your school district's **family engagement plan** as it relates to the preK program.
14. Please describe your **strategies** for engaging parents, families, and the community.
15. How has your district's family engagement program changed since your district received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant? [Probes: communication to preK students' families, events, parent liaison, parent training/education, or wrap around services to preK families.]

We will now move on to talk about how your school district monitors children's progress.

16. Please describe how your school district **monitors** preK children's progress. What assessments do you use? [Probes: academic, health, and wellness.]
17. How does your school district **report** children's progress to parents? To TEA?

I would like to talk about professional development for preK teachers.

18. Please describe the **types of professional development** activities planned for your preK teachers for this school year that will be funded by the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. [Probe: Probe to learn whether the administrator is using funds to conduct preK classroom observations and/or walkthroughs or other forms of job-embedded PD.]
19. Are these new professional development activities or a continuation of PD activities the district has been providing to teachers?
20. Please describe any additional PD offered to preK teachers that is *not* covered by the grant.
21. What professional development activities are still needed for preK teachers to improve their teaching practices?

Overall, do you feel the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant is helping to improve the quality of the preK program in your school district?

22. If the grant is funded in the next legislative session, how might your school district improve the preK program?
23. Additionally, what elements of your existing preK program will be sustainable without grant funding?

Lastly, is there anything else you would like to share about the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant, implementation of the grant, or possible continuation of the grant?

This concludes the interview.

Thank you for participating!

Appendix C. District Staff Interview Protocol

High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Studies Project

District Staff Interview Protocol 2016-2017

Hello, my name is _____. First, I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Studies Project is to learn from district and school staff about their perceptions of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant program, how they are utilizing the funding, and about the challenges and successes districts and schools have experienced as participants in the grant program.

My organization, the Texas Comprehensive Center at the American Institutes for Research, is collaborating with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to conduct this study. In addition to your program, we are visiting 10 other Texas school districts and charter schools. We chose districts based on their geographic region in the state and the size of their prekindergarten program. Our goal is to have a diverse sample of school districts and charter schools that can provide valuable information about how they utilizing the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant funds.

I want to reassure you that your responses are confidential and will not be identified as belonging to you. There are no right or wrong answers; we want to learn from you! Please be honest when considering your answers. I would like to audio record this session so that I can focus on your answers and have an accurate record of your comments for analysis later. After I take notes from the recordings I will delete the audio files.

School name: _____

Names, roles/position of each participant:

First, I would like to know about your understanding of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant.

1. To start, will you tell me a little bit about your background and your role at [SCHOOL DISTRICT NAME]?
2. It's my/our understanding that your district applied for the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant in 2015. Were you a part of that process? Please describe your involvement with the district's application for the High-Quality Prekindergarten grant.
3. In your own words, what do you think are the necessary elements for a public prekindergarten program to be high-quality?
4. Are you familiar with the grant's objectives? If yes, please describe your understanding of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant objectives. [IF THEY ARE NOT FAMILIAR, WE CAN SHARE THE OBJECTIVES AND ASK THEIR PERSPECTIVE OF THE OBJECTIVES.]
5. Please describe your school district's priorities for implementing a high-quality preK program? [Probe: How were your districts priorities determined?]
6. What do you think about those priorities? How, or in what ways, do your district's preK program priorities align with the grant's objectives?"
7. Of the staff at your district, who would you say is primarily responsible for implementing a high-quality preK program? Of the staff you mentioned, what are their responsibilities in regard to the district's preK program?

Now we're going to dig in a little bit into the preK program at your district.

8. Why did your district apply for the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant funding?
9. Are all of your elementary schools participating? [IF THEY SAY NO, ASK HOW THEY IDENTIFIED SCHOOLS THAT ARE PARTICIPATING].
10. How is your district implementing the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant? [Probes: What programs, curricula, or other activities have been added to your district's preK program since your district received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant?]
11. Why did your district decide to use the funding on [INSERT ANSWER, COULD BE CURRICULA, HIRE TEACHERS, HIRE AIDES, PD, ASSESSMENTS, FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?]
12. Has your school district used the grant funds to hire new staff? If so, what positions were added and how do those new positions support the implementation of a high-quality preK program?

Next, I would like to inquire about your school district's family engagement activities.

13. Please describe your school district's **family engagement plan** as it relates to the preK program.
14. Please describe your **strategies** for engaging parents, families, and the community.
15. How has your district's family engagement program changed since your district received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant? [Probes: communication to preK students' families, events, parent liaison, parent training/education, or wrap around services to preK families.]

We will now move on to talk about how your school district monitors children's progress.

16. Please describe how your school district **monitors** preK children's progress. What assessments do you use? [Probes: academic, health, and wellness.]
17. How does your school district **report** children's progress to parents? To TEA?

I would like to talk about professional development for preK teachers.

18. Please describe the **types of professional development** activities planned for your preK teachers for this school year that will be funded by the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. [Probe: Probe to learn whether the administrator is using funds to conduct preK classroom observations and/or walkthroughs or other forms of job-embedded PD.]
19. Are these new professional development activities or a continuation of PD activities the district has been providing to teachers?
20. Please describe any additional PD offered to preK teachers that is *not* covered by the grant.
21. What professional development activities are still needed for preK teachers to improve their teaching practices?

Overall, do you feel the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant is helping to improve the quality of the preK program in your school district?

22. If the grant is funded in the next legislative session, how might your school district improve the preK program?
23. Additionally, what elements of your existing preK program will be sustainable without grant funding?

Lastly, is there anything else you would like to share about the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant, implementation of the grant, or possible continuation of the grant?

This concludes the interview.

Thank you for participating!

Appendix D. Teacher Focus Group Protocol

High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Studies Project

Teacher Focus Group Protocol 2016-2017

Hello, my name is _____. First, I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. The purpose of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Studies Project is to learn from district and school staff about their perceptions of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant program, how they are utilizing the funding, and about the challenges and successes districts and schools have experienced as participants in the grant program.

My organization, the Texas Comprehensive Center at the American Institutes for Research, is collaborating with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to conduct this study. In addition to your program, we are visiting 10 other Texas school districts and charter schools. We chose districts based on their geographic region in the state and the size of their prekindergarten program. Our goal is to have a diverse sample of school districts and charter schools that can provide valuable information about how they are utilizing the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant funds.

I want to reassure you that your responses are confidential and will not be identified as belonging to you. There are no right or wrong answers; we want to learn from you! Please be honest when considering your answers. I would like to audio record this session so that I can focus on your answers and have an accurate record of your comments for analysis later. After I take notes from the recordings I will delete the audio files.

School name: _____

Names, roles/position of each participant:

First, I would like to know about your understanding of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant.

1. To start, will you each tell me your names and how long you've been teaching preK at [SCHOOL NAME]?
2. In your own words, what do you think are the necessary elements for a public prekindergarten to be high-quality?
3. We're/I'm here because your district is a recipient of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant. Have any of you heard about this grant?
 - a. [If yes:] please describe your understanding of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant objectives.
 - b. [If no, share objectives] What do you think about these objectives?

Now we're going to dig in a little bit into the preK program at your school

4. Please describe your school's priorities for implementing a high-quality preK program. Who sets these priorities? How are they communicated to you?
5. In what ways, if any, has your preK instruction changed this year as compared to previous years? Probes: are you implementing any new curricula or administering new assessments?
 - a. What curricula do you use in your preK classrooms? Do you feel the curricula meets the learning needs of your preK students?
6. What strategies do you use to engage parents and families in your students' learning? How do families learn about your school's preK program?
7. How has your school's family engagement program changed since your district received the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant? [Probes: communication to preK students' families, events, parent liaison, parent training/education, or wrap around services to preK families.]
8. Why did your school or district decide to use the funding on [INSERT ANSWER, COULD BE CURRICULA, HIRE NEW TEACHERS, HIRE NEW AIDES, PD, ASSESSMENTS, FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, ETC.]

We will now move on to talk about how your school monitors children's progress.

9. What types of assessments do you administer? [Probe for cognitive, health, and wellness] How often are students assessed?

10. How are results from assessments used in your classroom? Are there any other ways assessment data is used? [Probe for school or district uses, such as program monitoring]
11. How does your school report children's progress to parents? Do you meet with parents to discuss their student's progress? If yes, how often?

I would like to talk about the professional development you're provided as preK teachers

12. Please describe the professional development you've received this year as preK teachers. [Probe for various types of PD, such as workshops and trainings, as well as job-embedded PD such as observations and walkthroughs.]
13. Is the district helping you financially with obtaining a higher education degree such as a Bachelors or Master degree?
14. Is the district helping you financially with obtaining a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential?
15. Are there additional professional development opportunities you would like as a preK teacher?

Lastly, is there anything else you would like to share about the preK program at your school, your efforts to engage families, or the professional development you have received?

This concludes the focus group.

Thank you for participating!

Appendix E. Classroom Observation Protocol

High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Case Study Project

CLASSROOM WALKTHROUGH FORM

Observer: It will take about 30 – 45 minutes to complete this form. Please visit and observe all areas indicated in the form. When you select “Not Observed” or “No Opportunity to Observe”, please provide a note in the “Comments” column explaining why you made that selection. Please be descriptive.

School Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Time Started: _____ **Time Ended:** _____ **Observer Name:** _____

Observation Criteria	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT				
Classroom space is organized into distinct learning centers addressing multiple domains of development and allows for movement.				
The daily schedule allows for quiet and active activities.				
Daily schedule includes activities targeting or reinforcing development within all 5 primary developmental domains				
Daily schedule includes small group instruction.				
The teacher maximizes instructional time by using effective classroom routines, preparing materials ahead of time, and planning for transitions.				

Observation Criteria	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION				
Teachers use children’s names frequently and speak to children at their eye level.				
Back and forth conversation exchanges occur between teachers and children.				
Teachers name/label various items and specific parts of objects and speak in complete sentences when addressing children.				
Teachers scaffold children’s language and encourages conversation.				
Classroom materials and learning centers are labeled.				
Variety of children’s work, including writing samples are displayed.				
A variety of age-appropriate books are available.				
Management charts such as classroom rules, daily schedule, attendance, helper duties, and activity center organizer are posted.				
Alphabet activities are evident (letter wall sequenced from A to Z, activities using children’s names, theme vocabulary, etc.).				
Teacher models writing and emphasizes concepts of print such as “thinking out loud”.				

Observation Criteria	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
Shared writing activities (class-made books, graphs, etc.) are evident.				
Daily opportunities for children to write are evident.				
MATHEMATICS				
Hands-on math activities are evident.				
Math is incorporated into classroom routines (counting songs/games, attendance, lunch count, voting, graphs, etc.).				
Teachers use book reading to reinforce math concepts such as patterning, counting, and shapes.				
SCIENCE				
Teacher models scientific vocabulary and provides opportunities for children to practice their use of scientific vocabulary (e.g., patterns, cause and effect, change, speed, direction, parts of plants, etc.)				
Science materials are accessible to children on a regular basis.				

Observation Criteria	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
Ongoing science experimentation is evident in the classroom (e.g., children participate in the care of class pets, children track growth and progress of various science projects, children collect simple scientific data and/or have “collections” of natural objects such as rocks and shells).				
TECHNOLOGY				
Children have access to technology (computers, iPads, etc.) to support learning such as watching educational videos, practicing writing skills on a SMART board, playing ABC games, etc.				
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT				
The daily schedule includes multiple opportunities for gross motor and fine motor skill development.				
HEALTH AND WELLNESS				
Teachers respond promptly and sensitively to children using verbal and nonverbal techniques.				
Teachers use positive guidance techniques to encourage children to regulate their own behavior.				
Teachers help children label their feelings and talk about feelings with other children, as well as the teacher.				

Observation Criteria	Observed	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
Teachers model positive interactions and problem solving techniques.				
Teachers assist children and provide techniques for monitoring feelings and using strategies for appropriate behaviors and interactions.				
FINE ARTS				
Children have access to a wide variety of materials for sensory play and exploration.				
Children have opportunities for self-expression through art, music appreciation, or other means.				

Appendix F. Site Visit Schedule

Region	District	Date of Site Visit	TEA Team Member	TXCC Team Member	ESC Team Member
1	McAllen ISD	12/14/16		✓	✓
1	Hidalgo ISD	12/8/16		✓	✓
4	Promise Community School	12/14/16		✓	✓
4	Alief ISD	12/13/16		✓	✓
7	Tyler ISD	12/8/16	✓	✓	
10	Dallas ISD	12/8/16	✓	✓	✓
10	Lancaster ISD	12/6/16	✓	✓	✓
19	El Paso ISD	12/15/16		✓	✓
20	North East ISD	12/13/16		✓	✓
13	Harmony Public Schools–Austin	1/9–10/17	✓	✓	