Evaluation of the Texas High School Project

Second Comprehensive Annual Report Executive Summary

SRI International

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This second annual report of the evaluation satisfies *Rider 79 of the General Appropriations Act of the 80th Texas Legislative Session pertaining to the Texas-Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (T-STEM), Early College High School (ECHS), and High School Redesign and Restructuring (HSRR) programs, which stipulates that those programs be evaluated by TEA.*

Executive Summary

This report is the second comprehensive annual report of the Texas High School Project (THSP) evaluation. The evaluation encompasses the multiple high school reform grant programs under THSP, assessing the implementation and impact on student performance of grantees that first began reforms from 2006–07 through 2009–10.

Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, the second annual report builds on the results discussed in the prior report covering 2007–08 (Young, et al., 2010),[1] and addresses the following questions for the 2008–09 school year specifically:

- How are THSP-supported schools implementing key reform elements as designed or described by the THSP grant programs? What factors facilitate implementation, and what factors hinder it?
- How do reform model networks support schools in implementation?
- What effects have THSP and its individual grant programs had to date on selected ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade student outcomes?

THSP's mission is to ensure that all Texas students graduate from high school ready to tackle college and/or career successfully. The $346 million investment[2] supports the redesign of existing high schools, as well as the start-up of new standalone schools and schools within schools. THSP was created in 2003 by a public-private alliance that includes the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Office of the Governor, Texas Legislature, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT), National Instruments, Wallace Foundation, Greater Texas Foundation, and Meadows Foundation.

Through 2008–09, THSP fulfilled its mission by funding schools, districts, and charter management organizations (CMOs) across a range of grant programs, specifically:

- Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (T-STEM)
- Early College High School (ECHS)
- High School Redesign initiatives including High School Redesign and Restructuring (HSRR), High Schools That Work Enhanced Design Network (HSTW), High School Redesign (HSRD), and District Engagement (DIEN)
- New Schools and Charter Schools (NSCS).

THSP began enacting a new strategic plan in 2009–10. In their new phase, THSP aims to scale up promising practices using evidence of grantees' ongoing reform efforts. This change in strategic direction is not reflected in this report because the report is based on 2008–09 data; subsequent reports will cover school years pertaining to the new strategic plan.

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1 The report, *Evaluation of the Texas High School Project. First Comprehensive Annual Report,* can be downloaded from http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2904&menu_id=949.

2 As of August 2010.

Key Findings

- In 2008–09, students in new, small schools opened under the T-STEM, ECHS, and NSCS programs generally performed better than matched comparison school peers on multiple ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade outcomes, including TAKS achievement and attendance.
- Some evidence is also emerging that as T-STEM academies and ECHSs mature and as the grant programs refine their school supports over time, student performance in those schools is improving relative to matched comparison schools.
- Students in the comprehensive high schools supported by the grant programs under THSP's High School Redesign initiative performed similarly to matched comparison school peers on the vast majority of 2008–09 outcomes studied.
- T-STEM academies and ECHSs visited in 2008–09 had made significant progress in implementing certain core elements of their respective models while addressing challenges in others. Key features designed for upper-year students were also in the planning stages at the schools not yet serving juniors and seniors.
- Through 2008–09, CMOs funded under the NSCS program to replicate their respective school models were building central office capacity to support their schools and refining human capital strategies in particular as the foundation for continuing growth.
- With few exceptions, existing comprehensive high schools supported by grant programs under the High School Redesign initiative and visited in 2008–09 faced numerous challenges in reforming established norms and practices.

Program Implementation and Outcomes

T-STEM Program

The T-STEM program is unique in its efforts to build a network of STEM academies at the secondary level, along with a statewide infrastructure to support these schools. The program's ultimate purposes are to improve math and science achievement across the state and to increase the number of students who pursue STEM careers. It has achieved some fundamental successes: T-STEM academies, T-STEM centers, and an integrated T-STEM support network were established and are in operation, and the program plans to open more academies in the future. A T-STEM blueprint (2008–09) provided definitions and benchmarks for T-STEM academies and guided the work of school leaders and teachers, T-STEM center staff, and external T-STEM coaches who support the academies.

T-STEM academies implemented different benchmarks of the T-STEM blueprint to varying degrees. The level of implementation appeared to be based on the developmental stage of the school.

The seven academies visited in 2008–09 had implemented some core elements of the T-STEM blueprint, while other elements remained challenging. They had established a genuine STEM focus and college-going orientation for students. Other components of the blueprint, such as building dual-credit, internships, and work-based learning opportunities for students, were still under development at the academies not yet serving juniors and seniors. Most of the academies in the 2008–09 sample were actively planning dual-credit and internship programs for their students in the near future.

Other T-STEM blueprint components that were more challenging for academies to implement were related to the classroom practice, consistent with research findings that instructional reforms are among the most difficult to establish and that schools often focus on structural reforms before instructional changes (Shear, et al., 2005). T-STEM academy teachers implemented to varying degrees key pedagogical strategies promoted by the T-STEM blueprint, such as problem-based learning (PBL) and interdisciplinary instruction. The academies that used PBL consistently were those that were supported by an established national model that provided extensive training, materials, and supports for implementing PBL in the classroom. Teachers at most academies, however, did not have a consistent understanding of PBL or the background or tools to implement PBL as an integral component of their classroom practice. Similarly, academies did not consistently organize instruction in a way that supported interdisciplinary studies (e.g., team-teaching across subject areas, integrating multiple subjects into coursework and projects). At the time of data collection, T-STEM centers had developed a foundational professional development (PD) course on PBL that they were beginning to offer to all academies. These efforts may strengthen PBL implementation in the coming years.

Most academies also supported students with some form of advisory, an ungraded, small class that provides time for teachers to monitor student progress overall and to address individual students' academic and other needs that may affect their schooling. The academies, however, faced difficulties in implementing advisory as envisioned by the blueprint. Given the small school setting (as required by the T-STEM blueprint), teachers and students naturally developed strong relationships, and leaders and teachers at some academies did not view advisory as essential. T-STEM academies would benefit from coaching or other assistance that

addresses how advisory can leverage, not duplicate, the relationships that exist at their schools to provide even more comprehensive supports for students.

During 2008–09, the T-STEM network began actively promoting learning across academies. These activities were still early in their development at the time of data collection. T-STEM coaching took place consistently, while other aspects of the network, including the online network and the statewide and regional academy meetings, were being designed and taking shape. The regional T-STEM centers, funded to support T-STEM academy implementation, opened in 2007–08 and were continuing to develop through 2008–09. Although the centers made notable progress building capacity, coordinating across centers, and building trusting relationships with the academies through 2009–10, few of the academies in the sample worked with the T-STEM centers, indicating that room remains for centers to expand their outreach efforts. The T-STEM centers were better positioned to assist the academies that opened subsequently in their planning and early implementation.

Students in the T-STEM program performed better than matched comparison school students in 2008–09 math and science TAKS scores. Outcomes may be improving as academies or the T-STEM program overall matures.

Perhaps reflecting their STEM focus, T-STEM academies thus far have performed better than matched comparison schools on TAKS-Math and Science scores. T-STEM academy ninth- and tenth-graders also had a higher likelihood of passing TAKS in all subjects compared with peers in matched schools. Ninth-grade nonrepeaters (i.e., first-time ninth-graders) in T-STEM academies had higher attendance than comparison school students.

In contrast, T-STEM eleventh-graders performed no better than their comparison school peers on the outcomes studied. The lack of differences in eleventh-grade outcomes may be due to the small number of T-STEM schools serving eleventh grade in 2008–09. Alternatively, T-STEM academies may serve students better the longer they have been in operation and thus subsequent cohorts of students obtained more positive results (i.e., ninth- and tenth-graders in T-STEM academies operating for three years or ninth-graders in T-STEM academies opened for two years as of 2008–09). Because the ninth- and tenth-grade results in the 2008–09 analysis include those from newly funded T-STEM schools, it also may be that the whole T-STEM system is improving, not just individual academies. The pattern is not entirely straightforward, but the 2008–09 analysis contributes to the evidence that the T-STEM model is demonstrating increasingly positive results.

ECHS Program

ECHSs implemented core components of the model but varied in the effectiveness of their college partnerships, implementation of key instructional strategies, and student supports.

In only their second year of operation, the four ECHSs visited in 2008–09 were on track in implementing key components of the ECHS model. They served the target population of at-risk students, refining student recruitment processes to do so; maintained a small-school structure, and had concrete plans for offering college courses or had already enrolled students in them.

The ECHSs varied, however, in:

- The nature of their college partnerships. The level of collaboration on PD and planning between institutes of higher education (IHE) and ECHS staff and the availability of a college liaison committed to developing the partnership and putting the college components in place to serve high school students were uneven across the schools in the sample. These ECHSs' experiences suggest that those located on the campus of the college partner have an easier time developing these aspects of the partnership.
- The degree to which teachers used the six instructional strategies defined by the ECHS model. The ECHSs visited were in the early stages of implementing those strategies. Trained instructional coaches planned to continue working with teachers on those strategies.
- The level of support teachers received generally. Where teachers reported feeling adequately supported, the school had strong professional learning communities with ample common planning time and PD opportunities.
- The comprehensiveness of student supports, i.e., the extent to which the school addressed students' academic, social, and emotional needs. The more comprehensive student support strategies included frequent, regularly scheduled tutoring, frequent advisories and study skills classes, college placement exam preparation, guidance counseling, and individual interventions by teachers. Teachers, however, expressed needs for more PD in offering the wide range of student supports.

Despite variation in how the ECHSs implemented the core elements, all of the visited schools enrolled students in college classes, thus beginning to provide them with the experience essential to the ECHS model.

The ECHS network has improved its guidance and assistance for schools in the early years of implementation. A focus on sustainability will be increasingly necessary as ECHSs move beyond their grant period.

Through a designation process introduced in 2008–09, the ECHS network clarified the core elements of the ECHS model. Schools wishing to be officially designated as an ECHS by TEA had to demonstrate that they were implementing all core components; the network provided supports to provisionally-designated schools so that they could strengthen their implementation. TEA and CFT also collaborated to increase support from coaches and TA providers for all designated schools.

Going forward, it is still too early to foresee what sustainability issues will arise for ECHSs in Texas. Sustaining the program is expensive because partnerships must cover tuition and textbooks for two years of college courses and provide the supports necessary to prepare high school students for success in college-level work. The first schools to receive ECHS grants completed their funding cycle in 2008–09. At the time of data collection, no schools had informed ECHS program officers that they could not continue to support the model financially. As more schools complete their grant funding, sharing across the network successful strategies for ensuring sustainability will be increasingly important. Along with stable funding sources to cover expenses such as tuition and textbooks, findings from the national ECHSI study suggest that other sustainability factors include a supportive policy environment and district and higher education partners' enduring commitment to the ECHS even when leadership turns over (AIR & SRI, 2009). Beyond school-level concerns, TEA is developing a sustainability strategy for the

entire ECHS network. Options may include developing products and resources for ECHS-designated schools if grant funds are available or offered to them on a fee-for-service basis.

ECHS students performed better than matched comparison school peers on TAKS across multiple subject areas, as well as in other outcomes. The results may also indicate that ECHSs are improving over time.

Ninth-grade nonrepeaters and tenth-graders in ECHSs had higher TAKS performance in almost all core subject areas, as well as in passing all TAKS in general compared with students in matched schools. Ninth-grade nonrepeaters, tenth-, and eleventh-graders also had higher attendance than did comparison school peers. ECHS students were more likely to be promoted to the tenth-grade and to take accelerated learning courses in the eleventh-grade than were comparison school students.

Although the ECHSs' eleventh-graders performed similarly to peers in comparison schools on TAKS outcomes, those students were the first to attend ECHSs. The stronger results among ninth- and tenth-graders in 2008–09 TAKS outcomes may be a promising indicator that, as the original ECHSs mature, they have improved in meeting their students' needs. At the same time, the ECHSs that opened during the two subsequent years have contributed to the positive ninth- and tenth-grade results, which may indicate an improvement in the ECHS program overall and the supports it provides to schools.

New Schools and Charter Schools Program

The NSCS program funds CMOs to open new campuses that replicate their respective school models. The three CMOs visited in both spring 2008 and 2009 were relatively successful in establishing the key elements of their models at the replication sites. Although the CMOs' school models differ in specifics, the three CMOs aim to offer students a rigorous college preparatory curriculum and to engage students, many of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, in the importance of pursuing higher education.

To varying degrees, the three CMOs established rigorous curriculum and integrated extensive student supports. Making the curriculum relevant for students, however, was based on individual teacher skills and inclination.

Across the three CMOs studied, the replication sites generally established rigorous curriculum through high content standards—based on TEKS and in some cases higher standards—and expected all students to take advanced courses such as Advanced Placement (AP). The CMOs differed somewhat as teachers and CMO-level staff for two of the CMOs reported being able to implement school cultures and processes more consistently across campuses than those at the third. Because these CMOs served high-needs students who were often inadequately prepared for the challenging curriculum that the charter schools offered, the CMOs sought to raise students' skills up to grade level in their first year there; they all served students in the middle grades and below to maximize student achievement before the critical high school years.

To engage students in learning, CMOs expected teachers to personalize instruction and make course content relevant. For the most part, the small-school structure facilitated teachers' relationships with students as learners and their knowledge of students' lives outside of school insofar as homelife affected school engagement and performance. To help teachers understand

students' needs better and to tailor instruction accordingly, all three CMOs were developing ways to use data comprehensively. Making the curriculum relevant to students, however, was largely left to individual teachers, as was true in THSP schools across the various grant programs. The CMOs generally assumed that their college preparatory curriculum was relevant to students because students aimed to go to college.

The CMOs' school models integrated extensive supports to help students and their parents realize college aspirations. In addition to providing more instruction through an extended day, the support strategies sought to broaden students' knowledge of potential careers, college application and financial aid processes, and college life. A curriculum that combined advisory, career exploration, and college knowledge started in the CMOs' middle schools, as did conversations between school staff and parents about the goal of sending their children to college and what achieving that goal entails. Although the three CMOs were at different stages in developing these strategies, their conception and implementation of student supports were far more comprehensive than those of most traditional high schools visited under other THSP grant programs.

Human capital strategies were critical to the CMOs' abilities to sustain their expansion plans and to replicate their school models.

The three CMOs' replication experiences illustrated the necessity for human capital strategies that sustain and develop leadership; facilitate teacher hiring, training, and retention; and build central office capacities to serve additional schools. The CMOs varied in their leadership development strategies, with a strong tendency to promote leaders from within their ranks to ensure that individuals familiar with the school model and culture lead the new schools. With rapid expansion, however, CMOs ran the risk of "cannibalizing" existing campuses to staff new schools with experienced leaders and teachers. Across the CMOs studied, high proportions of novice teachers made teacher training a large-scale effort annually—an effort that will continue to expand as the CMOs open more replication sites. The number of novices that CMOs need to train each year will also depend on the schools' ability to retain successful teachers, which would reduce the number of new hires. Although their plans were at different stages of development, the CMOs were attempting to improve teacher retention through more intensive supports and a differentiated career ladder that builds in formal teacher leadership roles for effective teachers.

Students in NSCS sites outperformed their peers in comparison schools on most outcomes studied.

NSCS students performed higher than comparison school students on TAKS in all subject areas for all three grade levels, except ninth- and tenth-grade reading/English, and had higher rates of passing all TAKS in general. NSCS' students' greater growth in TAKS-Math scores suggests sustained improvement in math achievement. Moreover, NSCS tenth- and eleventh-graders had higher attendance compared with peers in matched schools. On the other hand, ninth-grade nonrepeaters had a lower likelihood of passing Algebra I than did their comparison school peers, but the reasons for those results were unclear.

Although the effect sizes for eleventh-grade outcomes were notable, the results were based only on 19 eleventh-graders in one NSCS school and their peers in comparison schools. That one NSCS school seems to have had strong positive effects on all student outcomes but

the results for the eleventh-graders cannot be generalized to the broader NSCS student population. The eleventh-grade analysis reported for NSCS in the next report will have a larger sample size.

High School Redesign Initiative

The grant programs under the High School Redesign initiative—HSRR, HSTW, HSRD, and DIEN—all target traditional comprehensive high schools, which are similar in structure to the high schools that the vast majority of Texas students attend. The four programs all aim to improve student achievement using various strategies, including strengthening teacher-student relationships; making curriculum more academically rigorous and real-world relevant; and providing PD and other supports to school leaders and teachers. Although not all of the schools are rated academically unacceptable (AU) during the whole grant period, improving student performance is a primary goal for the grantees under the High School Redesign initiative programs.

Across the 14 redesigned high schools visited in spring 2009, no patterns were distinguishable by grant program. Along with relatively similar goals across the programs, the common context of the comprehensive high school and the challenges they encountered in reforming existing structures and practices were in all likelihood more powerful than the specific supports offered by each grant program.

Schools with the most coherent reforms focused on teaching and learning and teacher-student relationships. State accountability policies exercised the most influence over AU schools and their reform efforts.

Across the programs under the High School Redesign initiative, the visited schools that made the most progress in reform implementation concentrated on instructional improvement, teacher PD, stronger teacher-student relationships, and teachers' data use to determine students' needs. However, few schools had a clearly communicated and shared vision of high-quality instruction and thus, their teacher learning opportunities were not strategically aligned with instructional improvement. Especially among AU schools, state accountability policies focusing on passing TAKS reinforced the prevalence of TAKS preparation, whether across core areas or in the one or two weakest subjects. Limited time, energy, and resources meant that improving instructional practices and rigor beyond preparing students for TAKS received relatively little attention at those schools.

Student supports are emerging as a distinguishing factor for schools that meet the needs of at-risk students and raise their performance and expectations to a college-ready level. In almost all cases, teachers are on the frontlines not just of instruction as traditionally defined, but also as the key providers of the student supports envisioned in the reforms. In the redesigned high schools with promising student support strategies, teachers received data and dedicated time to get to understand individual students as learners. And as some of the redesigned high schools demonstrated, if teachers are the primary deliverers of an advisory curriculum in particular, they need to be trained extensively; most teachers have not had the preparation to be guidance counselors or to deal with the range of social issues that many high school students struggle with today.

Students in each of the four programs under the High School Redesign initiative performed similarly to comparison school peers on the majority of 2008–09 outcomes examined.

Students in the programs under the High School Redesign initiative performed similarly to those in the matched comparison schools on almost all 2008–09 TAKS outcomes for ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-graders. The only exceptions were ninth-grade repeaters in HSTW schools, who performed better than those in comparison schools on both TAKS-Math and Reading, and ninth-grade repeaters in HSRD, who performed below those in comparison schools in TAKS-Reading.

Likewise, students in schools under the High School Redesign initiative programs performed similarly to comparison schools peers on almost all 2008–09 non-TAKS outcomes investigated for the three grades. The only exceptions were ninth-grade repeaters in DIEN schools who had a higher likelihood of passing Algebra I in their repeated year than did their peers in comparison schools; HSRR students who had a higher likelihood of being promoted to tenth grade; and HSRD tenth-graders who had a higher average absence rate than comparison school peers.

District Leadership Program

In addition to the school-level grants provided by the programs discussed thus far, THSP operated a smaller effort focused on building district leadership capacity. This program recognized the influence of the district on local school reform and thus targeted central office capacity to improve school reform implementation. The district leadership program supported Dallas Independent School District (ISD), Houston ISD, and San Antonio ISD to build district capacity in supporting high school reform.

THSP's district capacity-building efforts shifted to emphasize performance management.

THSP's strategies to build district capacity evolved in 2008–09 to focus on performance-management activities. Such activities encompassed improving the districts' abilities to integrate their initiatives, promoting data use, and expanding the infrastructure for data use through a planning grant from BMGF for the Big 8 districts (eight of the largest urban districts in the state). The power of collaboration was one early lesson. Collaboration not only helped districts learn from one another, but also engaged administrators more deeply in district improvement processes. Such engagement in turn might lead administrators to sustain new practices after seed funding expires.

Networking schools and districts emerged as a capacity-building strategy that both THSP and districts were adopting. THSP efforts to establish a professional learning community (PLC) of large districts (and possibly an expanded group to achieve greater regional representation), combined with the Texas Consortium on School Research (a researcher-practitioner partnership in 19 districts), may prove a source for future district capacity-building. Similarly, large districts were engaging their school leaders in activities such as joint campus visits to learn from each other.

District priorities and strategies influenced whether and how schools implement THSP-related reforms.

High school reform efforts, including those related to THSP, continued to fall under—and in many cases be dominated by—overarching district strategies. School-level reform efforts fell on a landscape shaped by central office efforts to improve their supports for schools and to ensure high-quality instruction for all students across the district. To build more central supports, districts required common practices across schools such as using similar benchmark assessments so that district staff could differentiate areas for which all schools or a subset of schools needed assistance. Districts required teachers to follow a common curricular scope and sequence and to use data to inform instruction as additional levers in creating coherence and accountability across their schools. But maintaining the appropriate balance between central office requirements and providing schools with sufficient flexibility to adapt reforms appeared to remain a challenge for districts.

Across the various THSP reforms, districts with schools participating in T-STEM or ECHS explicitly endorsed those school models, although their provision of resources and expertise varied. For THSP programs addressing comprehensive high schools, district support varied and, in almost all cases, district strategies took priority. As a result, engaging districts may prove critical if external network providers want to encourage schools to implement their reform models with greater fidelity. Finally, districts are at different stages of thinking about how to improve high school performance, suggesting that THSP's efforts to engage districts may need to be tailored to their contexts.

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THSP is an ambitious and complex undertaking, offering great challenges to all involved parties—grantees, TA providers, network leaders, both sides of the public-private alliance that supports the work, and, not least, the evaluators. After two years of documented implementation, the evaluation can begin to detect the possibility of some positive trends emerging from the concerted efforts to improve high school education in Texas. For example, students in schools following several of the THSP models are outperforming peers in comparison schools on important student outcome indicators. Nevertheless, findings after two years of data collection and analysis are not yet definitive or robust. A third year of data (for the 2009–10 school year) is currently being analyzed, with the next evaluation report scheduled for submission in spring 2011, after 2009–10 student outcome data become available from TEA. The trends across three points in time (four, including the baseline of eighth-grade achievement for each ninth-grade cohort) for a substantial number of schools will provide a much stronger case for THSP results—whether positive, neutral, or negative. Further, for a limited number of participating THSP schools (those beginning implementation in 2006–07), the next report will include student outcomes through twelfth grade and high school completion. The long wait for answers to evaluation questions may be on the horizon.

To download the complete report, including appendices, please go to
http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2904&menu_id=949