Evaluation of the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program: Cycles 1 and 2 (May 2011)

Executive Summary

Submitted to: Texas Education Agency

● ● ● | Arroyo Research Services

CREDITS

Arroyo Research Services is an education professional services firm that helps education organizations meet their goals through meaningful research, measurement, evaluation, and consulting services. We help organizations develop and use actionable data to surpass their prior performance.

Contributing Authors

Kirk Vandersall
Michelle Vruwink
Raymond Barclay

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This report is available online at the Texas Education Agency's website:
http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2898&menu_id=949.

Citation

Vandersall, K., Vruwink, M., & Barclay, R. (2011). *Evaluation of the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program: Cycles 1 and 2 (May 2011)*. Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency.

This page has been deliberately left blank.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This page has been deliberately left blank.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents evaluation findings for the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program (TDRPP), focusing on implementation and outcomes achieved from August 28, 2008 through May 31, 2010. TDRPP was designed to provide students 25 years of age or younger who have dropped out of Texas public secondary schools the opportunity to continue their education and prepare for future work and education by completing their high school diploma or demonstrating college readiness. It was established based on a recommendation of the High School Completion and Success Initiative Council and was funded by the Texas State Legislature. Eligible applicants included local school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, institutions of higher education (IHEs), county departments of education, education service centers (ESCs), and nonprofit education organizations. Competitive grant awards were made to 45 of these education organizations throughout the state.

Among Texas Education Agency (TEA) initiatives, TDRPP is unique in its focus, goals, and funding structure. TDRPP focuses on reengaging students who have already dropped out of school, rather than on preventing students from leaving school. Rather than solely focusing on high school graduation, TDRPP also encourages students who have dropped out of public school to pursue college enrollment. TDRPP grantees seek to assist students who have dropped out of public school either to earn a high school diploma or to demonstrate college readiness. College readiness is defined as earning a General Education Development (GED) certificate, in addition to meeting minimum passing standards on a Texas Success Initiative (TSI) approved instrument, and earning college credit in a core course or through advanced technical credit. The TDRPP funding structure is also unusual in that it includes a pay-for-performance model that directly ties payments to demonstrated student academic progress and program completion. Grantees may use earned performance funds to bolster services, extend the program past the end date, or

Highlights

In its first two years, TDRPP made a meaningful impact on the lives of its graduates and filled an important gap in Texas educational services for students who have dropped out of school.

- Overall, grantees implemented TDRPP with fidelity and vigor. Grantees served 4,141 students, twice as many as projected.
- 1,283 students completed the program by earning a high school diploma or demonstrating college readiness.
- The average TDRPP graduate is expected to earn $246,348 more in his or her lifetime than a high school dropout.
- Because the program is operating beyond the evaluation cut-off date, significant additional outcomes are expected.

Evaluation estimates suggest TDRPP will save the state $95 million in current dollars

offer student incentives.

TEA contracted with Arroyo Research Services (ARS) in December 2008 to conduct an evaluation of TDRPP. Focusing on implementation and outcomes achieved from August 28, 2008 through May 31, 2010, the evaluation considered four key objectives specified by TEA:

01 | Describe and evaluate the implementation of program strategies
02 | Evaluate the impact of the program on student outcomes
03 | Evaluate the impact of the program on teacher/staff effectiveness
04 | Determine the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the program

TDRPP is demonstrating measurable student accomplishments and strong benefits in relation to costs. Key findings from the evaluation include:

- TEA funded grantees to serve 2,077 students. As of May 2010, 1,283 students had completed the program and a total of 4,141 were served, fully double the projected number.
- TDRPP is expected to save the state $95.3 million in current dollars after accounting for initial program expenditures.
- The average TDRPP graduate is expected to earn $246,348 more in his or her lifetime than a high school dropout.
- Six of the 45 grantees accounted for over one-half of all program completions.

Additional key findings for each of the evaluation objectives are highlighted in this summary and described further throughout the report.

KEY FINDINGS

01 | Implementation of program strategies

- **Grantees implemented programs that were very student-focused in design, incorporating flexible schedules, opportunities for self-paced learning, and a wide variety of academic and social support services.**
  - A majority of grantees offered students the choice of attending during regular school hours, evening (or night) hours, or flexible hours.
  - Nearly 80% provided students with the opportunity to advance through self-paced classes.
  - Ten of the 45 grantees offered the Optional Flexible School Day Program.
  - Over half (62%) of all grantees offered tutoring and/or mentoring services to their students.
  - All grantees offered a variety of social support services. The most commonly offered services included case management, child care, life services training, parenting education, and job training. Transportation was an integral service for many grantees as well.
  - Grantees also offered a wide variety of academic support services. TDRPP students with access to a greater number of academic services were more likely to advance grade levels.

- While many grantees were already operating alternative education programs prior to receipt of TDRPP funds, **most program coordinators reported that TDRPP funds allowed more intensive recruiting and a stronger focus on the needs of out-of-school youth, rather than students at risk of dropping out.**

- **Addressing social service needs was an important component of TDRPP programs.**
  - The majority (70%) of TDRPP students are economically disadvantaged, compared to a statewide average of 39%, and have significant social service needs.
  - TDRPP allowed grantees to better meet the needs of these students by funding services such as child care, transportation, and professional counseling.
  - Even with TDRPP resources, over one-third of all grantees reported service needs they were unable to meet.

- **Over 60% of all grantees provided cash incentives or other awards to students for obtaining benchmarks and/or completions**.
  - Incentives were most commonly provided to students who completed TDRPP. Of the 15 grantees that paid incentives for graduation, six paid $500 and five paid $1,000; similar incentives were offered for enrollment in an IHE.
  - Cash incentives ranged in value from $10 to $1000. Grantees also offered non-cash incentives such as laptops, tuition for college coursework, dictionaries, and gift cards.

02 | Student outcomes

- **Participation in TDRPP resulted in many students who achieved benchmarks or successfully completed the program. However, successfully recovering dropouts proved challenging, with about 1 in 3 students enrolled in TDRPP leaving prior to completion as of May 31, 2010.**
  - Overall, 31% of TDRPP students completed the program, 33% remained in the program, and 36% dropped out. Among the 33% who remained, 12% of TDRPP students continued to make progress by successfully earning at least one interim benchmark or performance indicator (see Figure 1).
  - In addition to the 1,283 students who completed the program, TDRPP students overall achieved a total of 4,259 interim benchmarks.

> *"Always make students feel welcomed first. Then, make sure you've hired caring staff members, because most of these students have faced or are facing some incredible hardships. Finally, make sure you provide students with flexibility and support services."*
>
> **Grantee program director**

- **All grantee types achieved some success with TDRPP student completion.**

    - Local school districts had the highest percentage of program completers (37%). Completion percentages for other grantee types were 21% for nonprofit education organizations, 17% for open-enrollment charter schools, and 15% for IHEs.
    - Although nonprofit education organizations had larger absolute numbers of completers compared to IHEs, as well as a higher percentage of students that completed the program, attending a nonprofit was associated with lower odds for completion relative to IHEs when controlling for other student and program characteristics that take into account prior student academic performance.
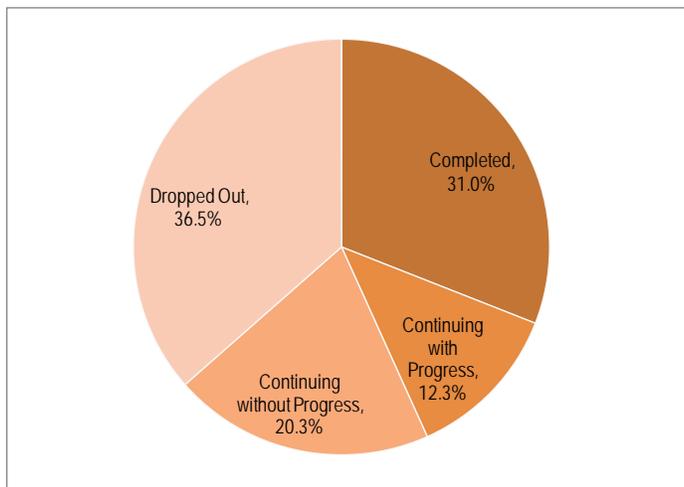
Figure 1. TDRPP student outcomes

Source: Data from performance payment reports submitted to TEA by grantees in June of 2009 and 2010.

- **Students entering TDRPP with more success in high school were more likely to graduate**. While this is not surprising, the relative success of students entering a dropout recovery program based on their prior high school performance warrants consideration when determining program goals and related policies for future dropout recovery programs. Grantees enrolling students closer to high school graduation or who have previously met Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) passing standards in several content areas will achieve more completions in a shorter period of time.
    - In brief, the higher the TDRPP student's last known grade level, the more likely it was that the student earned a high school diploma.
    - Similarly, TDRPP students who had successfully passed several TAKS content areas prior to enrolling in TDRPP were significantly more likely to earn a high school diploma than students with fewer prior TAKS successes.
    - To determine future funding guidelines, incentives, and other program features, consideration of whether the desired program goal is more completers, more overall progress by students who are further from graduation, placement into college, or other specific goals may be useful.

- **Some grantees were clearly more successful than others at achieving student completion. The six top-producing grantees accounted for nearly half of all completions (49%).**
    - Of the 1,158 students who earned high school diplomas, 550 (48%) were students at one of the six top-producing grantees.

- o Similarly, 80 of the 135 students (59%) who demonstrated college readiness were students of one of the six top-producing grantees.
- o All of the six top producers offered self-paced classes, compared to 73% of other grantees.
- o All six top producers had prior experience with the dropout recovery population; recruited aggressively using multi-pronged recruitment strategies including recruiters on staff; allowed students to enter the program at any time; and demonstrated flexibility in overcoming potential implementation barriers.
- o An effectiveness analysis controlling for student characteristics examined grantee performance in terms of predicted versus actual completions, percentage of students that completed, and total number of students that completed. This analysis found that five of the six top performers in terms of total completers were also deemed to be highly effective and were among the six top most effective grantees; the one top-producing grantee not found in the top six in the effectiveness analysis was in the top quartile.

03 | Teacher/staff effectiveness

- **Grantees consistently reported on the importance of a strong and committed staff to student success.** As the director of one of the six top-producing grantees noted, "Staffing is the crucial piece. You can have rigor and relevance, but it's the depth of the relationship that makes the difference."

- **Grantees reported successfully using grant funds to improve teacher/staff effectiveness with students who have dropped out of school.**
  - o Approximately one-half of all teachers and staff in TDRPP participated in dropout recovery-specific professional development. Teachers/staff who participated in professional development found activities that offered more dropout recovery-specific and hands-on experience to be most helpful.
  - o Grantees spent approximately 5% of TDRPP funds (a total of $770,982), plus an additional $295,535 in non-TDRPP funds, on teacher/staff professional development.
  - o Based in part on findings from the first year of the evaluation, TEA began offering TDRPP-specific professional development opportunities to grantees during 2009-2010. Grantees found these opportunities to be very useful. As one participant noted of the TEA training session in February 2010, "It was at that point that we really 'got it'."
  - o All TDRPP teachers held at least a bachelor's degree. Additionally, the majority held secondary certifications, and approximately one-third held master's degrees. One-half of all teachers reported two or more years' prior experience working with dropout recovery students.

> *"My [TDRPP teacher] built confidence in me. Put it in my head that I can do it…"*
>
> **TDRPP Graduate**

04 | Costs and benefits

- **TDRPP was a cost-effective investment of public funds. Ultimately, the state of Texas is estimated to benefit significantly -- $95 million -- from the students who successfully completed their TDRPP program as of May 2010. In addition, students who successfully complete TDRPP are expected to experience significant financial and personal gains relative to what they would experience as dropouts.**
    - **The average TDRPP graduate is expected to earn $246,348 more in his or her lifetime than a high school dropout.** This estimate is based on lifetime estimates of the difference in earnings for high school dropouts compared to high school graduates, students who complete some college or obtain associates degrees, and students who complete four year degrees using Texas estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) and estimation methods following Belfield and Levin (2007).
    - **TDRPP is expected to return $74,451 in net public benefits per student completing the program by earning a high school diploma or demonstrating college readiness.** This figure is an estimate of reduced public costs and increased public revenue, using Texas figures, for high school graduates compared to high school dropouts, calculated by the evaluators using 2010 dollars for the estimated working lifetime of TDRPP graduates (see Chapter 7). Multiplying this figure by the total number of TDRPP completers results in **a total of $95.3 million in net public benefits to the state of Texas after accounting for initial program costs**.

- **TDRPP grantees had an average total cost, including direct TDRPP funds, state aid, and allocated district tax revenues, of $5,571 per student served**.
    - The average total cost per student served differed by grantee type, and ranged from a low of $2,881 for IHEs to a high of $7,280 for open-enrollment charter schools.
    - The TDRPP grant award component of the total cost per student was $1,648.
    - **The total cost per TDRPP student completion was estimated to be $17,102.** Grantee costs per completion range from $5,972 for one grantee with 55 completions, to a high of $704,789 for a grantee with only 2 completions. Because grantees continued serving students after the May 31, 2010 evaluation cut-off date, the cost per student completion is expected to drop as additional students earn high school diplomas or demonstrate college readiness.

- **The six top-producing grantees had average costs per student completion of $11,754, compared to $22,275 for all other grantees. This is of course in part by definition, because the six top producers** had more completions, but it was also the case that the top producers had lower **overall costs per student served: $4,873 for the top producers compared to $6,024 for all other grantees.**

Based on these findings and the detailed discussion and data within the report, the evaluation team recommends the following, by objective, for consideration should TDRPP continue in the future:

01 | Implementation of program strategies

- Continue the increased programmatic support for grantees in the form of training and technical assistance, as established in Year 2. Grantees are beginning to learn from one another and from TEA staff and technical assistance providers. This resulted in more rapid implementation in the second grant year, and in more rapid accumulation of student outcomes.

- Extend the technical assistance to organizations that are developing and submitting grant proposals to ensure high quality TDRPP designs. TDRPP designs should include long-term planning for sustainability. Overall, grantees showed variation in the extent to which they planned for long-term funding from the beginning of the program, and the extent to which they planned for accessing and using resources for the benefit of their students during the grant period. This outcome could be maximized with provision of successful models for replication, collaboration with current grantees, and additional guidance from TEA during a planning phase or prior to the proposal development process.

- During site visits to the more successful programs, evaluators observed that staff retention and motivation are major drivers of student and grantee success. However, strong motivation can be difficult to sustain over time. Based on observations of grantee technical assistance sessions, feedback obtained during site visits, and a review of grantee comments in Grantee Progress Reports and Staff Surveys, the evaluators recommend considering increased cross-grantee collaboration, both virtual and in person, as a strategy to increase the sharing of approaches and strategies as well as to sustain staff motivation.

- Streamline the grantee service tracking and benchmark/payment reporting system to assure that data are reported consistently and on time, with reduced overall demand on grantees.

- Create a TDRPP portal for dropout recovery support that links to grantee web sites, tool kits, resource guides, sustainability guidance, testimonials, project plans, and other public materials through a single site.

02 | Student outcomes

- Continue support for the broad mix of programs and eligible grantees. Grantees served unique student populations with programs that shared common elements, as well as accommodated local needs.

- Encourage and focus on larger programs. While some of the smaller programs filled local needs, most of the TDRPP outcomes were produced by programs that were designed to serve larger numbers of students. The evaluators recommend setting a higher minimum number to be served in order to qualify for funding.

- Seek to identify and develop highly motivated project leaders. TDRPP grantee leaders were instrumental in providing the motivation to staff and students that resulted in high-performing programs. These high performers accounted for a large percentage of the overall program results. Grantees should have an identified project lead in place prior to grant award.

- Review grantee performance mid-way through the grant cycle. While a small number of grantees account for the majority of program outcomes, this also means that other grantees are underperforming compared to what is possible. Establish firm mid-year or first-year benchmarks and re-allocate funds from underperforming grantees to new or established grantees.

- Improve reporting and monitoring of program outcomes. The evaluation encountered some difficulties in grantee reporting of benchmarks, completions and leave reasons, including payment report records that did not match student roster records. It is likely that this resulted from reporting error rather than any malfeasance on the part of grantees. If possible, improved reporting procedures, and more timely and complete grantee monitoring and review of incoming reports by TEA would likely result in the elimination of such errors.

03| Teachers/staff

- Encourage more teachers and staff to participate in TEA-operated or contracted professional development. Although Year 2 state-level technical assistance and professional development mentioned earlier was open to all staff, the evaluators observed that most participants were directors and coordinators. The evaluators suggest that connecting with other dropout recovery staff while focusing on strategies for success can assist in promulgating core assistance strategies, provide motivation and encouragement to teachers and staff, and create a network of resources on which grantees can call for assistance and advice. Allowing grantee TDRPP professional development funds to support attendance at these sessions in order to encourage broader participation should be considered.

04 | Costs and benefits

- Consider examining cost per completion, percentage of completers, and overall costs per student as grantee benchmarks for judging interim grantee progress, as well as to determine grant continuations and new grants to experienced grantees.

- As noted above, consider focusing on larger programs for the added reason that they can be more cost-effective. Larger programs were better positioned to leverage other financial and programmatic resources, thus producing a greater number of outcomes in a cost-effective manner.

EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations relate to potential future evaluations of TDRPP:

- Gather and include data regarding student use of services. Grantees provided service availability information and general percentages of service utilization on Grantee Progress Reports, but determining the effects of various services would best be done by obtaining data on individual student use of academic and social support services.

- The evaluation modified its approach to cost/benefit modeling from the first interim report to this report in order to include district and charter estimates for state aid and district tax revenue.[1] This per-grantee approach should be extended to IHEs to capture state aid to colleges, universities, and nonprofit educational organizations, as well as any additional state or local government aid that supports their dropout recovery programs.

> *"My past is not my future"*
>
> **Motto of one of the six top-performing grantees**

- Two changes to grantee financial reporting would assist in evaluating costs and benefits: 1) changing Grantee Progress Reports to obtain the dollar value of non-TDRPP resources used to help students succeed, and 2) streamlining grantee financial reporting and aligning it to the reporting period for student outcomes. Successful reporting of non-TDRPP resources would likely require guidance from the evaluators, TEA, or both.

- Consider funding identification and analysis of non-TDRPP dropout recovery programs in Texas, or the creation of a comparison group of Texas dropouts who do not participate in any dropout recovery program. It is possible that some students who drop out of school return on their own to Texas public school and eventually complete a high school diploma. A control group consisting of a matched group of students who dropped out in similar years with similar characteristics to TDRPP student would allow examination of TDRPP successes relative to what happens to students who do not access drop out recovery programs.

---

[1] The Interim Report focused solely on total direct TDRPP expenditures per student using budgeted base funding and actual performance funding earned, and did not account for additional state aid. Interim Report cost data were also based on student enrollment as of May 31, 2009. Because Cycle 1 programs continued to enroll students for an additional year, Interim Report data are not comparable to the more complete figures presented here.

SUMMARY

In its first two years, TDRPP made a meaningful impact on the lives of its graduates, and filled an important gap in Texas educational services for students who had dropped out of school. Not only did grantees implement the program with fidelity and vigor, they served more students than initially targeted, producing considerable student outcomes and saving the state a predicted $95.3 million in current dollars after accounting for initial program expenditures.

The probability of continuing and accelerating the achievement of these outcomes, together with the demonstrated financial benefits to the state of reducing the number of dropouts, creates a strong argument in favor of continuing the program. Results reported within the body of the report suggest that, as grantees gain experience with TDRPP, they are able to expand their reach to serve larger numbers of students. The evaluators therefore anticipate further demonstration of student academic progress and improvements in cost-effectiveness as grantees continue to serve TDRPP students.

Evaluation findings presented in this report should be interpreted with caution. Because student outcomes associated with TDRPP expenditures and services are likely to be achieved between the data collection cutoff date for this report and the project end date of May 31, 2011 and beyond, significant additional outcomes are expected.