

TEXAS GEAR UP 2025 STATE GRANT

Year 1 Implementation Spotlight Report:
Findings from the Program Evaluation

August 2026



Texas Education Agency

Evaluation Report Prepared by:



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The ICF evaluation team would like to acknowledge the many members of the Texas Education Agency (TEA), site/campus staff, and collaborative organizations for their support of this evaluation. They provided valuable information and feedback to ensure that the evaluation team had a full understanding of the goals/objectives and implementation of the Texas GEAR UP 2025 State Grant program across participating sites and campuses. The evaluation team looks forward to the continued collaboration with TEA staff, site/campus staff, and other collaborators to provide a high-quality evaluation that can inform policy and practice for schools, nationally and in Texas. ICF (NASDAQ: ICFI) partners with government and commercial clients to deliver consulting services and technology solutions in the social programs, health, energy, climate change, environment, transportation, defense, and emergency management markets. The firm combines passion for its work with industry expertise and innovative analytics to produce compelling results throughout the entire program life cycle—from analysis and design through implementation and improvement.

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Program Overview

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) was awarded their third Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) State Grant in 2025, a 7-year program designed to increase the number of students who are prepared to enter and successfully complete postsecondary education. Working across nine independent school districts, TEA and its partners (TNTP and College Possible) provide academic support, postsecondary planning, family engagement, and expanded access to college and career opportunities. TEA contracted with ICF Incorporated, L.L.C. and Resources for Learning to conduct an external evaluation to examine program implementation, outcomes, impact, and sustainability and to explore the expansion of the Effective Advising Framework statewide initiative.

This report presents findings from an implementation study conducted in Year 1. Findings were derived from interviews and focus groups with 28 individuals representing each of the entities charged with implementing GEAR UP: TEA, TNTP, and each of the nine districts. Although this was the first year of the GEAR UP grant period, there was a delayed start and the grantee districts did not yet have a full year of implementation.



Exhibit ES1. Districts Participating in GEAR UP

Districts
Corsicana Independent School District (ISD)
Crockett ISD
Gladewater ISD
Marshall ISD
McGregor ISD
San Augustine ISD
Shepherd ISD
Tyler ISD
Willis ISD

Key Findings

Districts entered the GEAR UP program with a shared commitment to its goals and a high degree of enthusiasm for its potential benefit to students. Districts’ enthusiasm was reinforced by a shared belief that GEAR UP aligned with existing priorities and provided meaningful opportunities to enhance students’ college and career readiness.

During an abbreviated startup period, districts worked to build the people, partnerships, and systems needed to support implementation over the course of the program. Rather than fully implementing all planned activities, districts used the startup period to establish the structures, partnerships, and implementation processes needed to support the program over the next several years.



Key Findings (Continued)

Participants consistently described academic preparation, specifically Texas GEAR UP 2025 State Grant’s focus on timely Algebra I preparation, as a key part of a broader strategy to prepare students for success after high school. Participants described Algebra I as a foundational milestone that built student readiness for advanced coursework and expanded students’ college, career, and postsecondary opportunities, particularly when paired with career exploration and family engagement.

While districts shared a common commitment to GEAR UP, districts’ early implementation of the program progressed at different rates. Differences in implementation progress primarily reflected variation in districts’ existing organizational structures, staffing capacity, and competing responsibilities during the compressed startup period rather than differences in commitment to GEAR UP.

Looking ahead, participants identified opportunities to strengthen implementation through continued guidance, collaboration, and opportunities to learn from one another. Participants identified continued technical assistance, practical implementation resources, and opportunities for cross-district learning as key supports for sustaining momentum and strengthening implementation in Year 2.

Conclusion

Overall, districts started GEAR UP with strong commitment, an emerging implementation infrastructure, and a shared focus on improving students’ college and career readiness. Continued support and collaboration may help districts build on this foundation as implementation expands in Year 2.



The Texas (TX) Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) 2025 State Grant (SG)—TX GEAR UP 2025 SG—is a 7-year initiative, operating from the 2025–26 school year to the 2031–32 school year and designed to increase the number of students who are prepared to enter and successfully complete postsecondary education. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) and its partners (TNTP and College Possible) are providing academic support, postsecondary planning, family engagement, and expanded access to college and career opportunities through direct services to nine independent school districts. TX GEAR UP 2025 SG employs a hybrid service model that provides direct support to both a defined student cohort (i.e., the class of 2031, from Grade 7 through the first year of postsecondary education) and priority students, consisting of all Grade 11 and Grade 12 students in participating districts beginning in Year 3 of the program.

Districts participating in TX GEAR UP 2025 SG have a high proportion of students who are considered economically disadvantaged (ranging from 55% to 84%).¹ In addition, many of the districts are also engaged in the Leadership and Instructional Foundations (LIFT) statewide initiative, a large-scale effort that supports districts in adopting high-quality instructional materials, or HQIM, while providing leadership coaching, teacher professional learning, and system-level planning.² Because LIFT is designed to strengthen instructional quality and district capacity, it may complement GEAR UP and independently influence student outcomes. Exhibit 1 presents the nine districts participating in TX GEAR UP 2025 SG.

Exhibit 1. Districts Participating in the Texas GEAR UP 2025 State Grant

Districts	Middle School	High School
Corsicana Independent School District (ISD) [^]	Corsicana Middle School	Corsicana High School
Crockett ISD [^]	Crockett Junior High	Crockett High School
Gladewater ISD [^]	Gladewater Middle School	Gladewater High School
Marshall ISD [^]	Marshall Junior High	Marshall High School
McGregor ISD [^]	Isbill Junior High	McGregor High School
San Augustine ISD [*]	San Augustine Middle School	San Augustine High School
Shepherd ISD [^]	Shepherd Middle School	Shepherd High School
Tyler ISD	Moore Middle School Butler Middle School	Tyler High School
Willis ISD [^]	Brabham Middle School Lynn Lucas Middle School	Willis High School

[^]Districts participating in the Leadership and Instructional Foundations (LIFT) grant program.
^{*}In the 2025–26 school year, San Augustine Secondary School served students from Grades 6–12. Beginning in 2026–27, students in Grade 6–8 will be served by San Augustine Middle School and those in Grades 9–12 will be served by San Augustine High School.



TEA contracted with ICF Incorporated, L.L.C. and Resources for Learning (RFL) to conduct an external evaluation to examine program implementation, outcomes, impact, and sustainability and explore the expansion of the Texas Effective Advising Framework statewide initiative.

The evaluation team is using a longitudinal mixed-method design to comprehensively address the TX GEAR UP 2025 SG evaluation objectives and associated research questions over time and across the participating campuses. The evaluation will include various quantitative and qualitative primary data sources (e.g., student surveys and focus groups/interviews) and secondary data shared by TEA (e.g., GEAR UP participation data, student outcome data, student administrative data).

The first year of evaluation focused on how districts approached implementation, the strengths and challenges they encountered, and the supports they identified as most valuable moving forward. It also examined TEA's partnership with TNTP to support program implementation in the districts and statewide. Between May 26, 2026 and June 10, 2026, RFL conducted virtual interviews and focus groups with 28 individuals representing the various organizations charged with implementing the TX GEAR UP 2025 SG: TEA, TNTP, and each of the 9 districts. Exhibit 2 details the data collection participants.

Exhibit 2. Data Collection Participants

- 23 district representatives, including 8 district GEAR UP coordinators ("district coordinators"), 8 principals, 1 district coordinator/principal, 1 district coordinator/career and technical education teacher, 1 executive director of College, Career, and Military Readiness, 2 superintendents, 1 director of federal and state programs, and 1 executive director of special programs
- 2 TEA representatives
- 3 TNTP representatives

Full details of the evaluation methodology and the interview and focus group protocols that guided these discussions may be found in the Appendix.

Although the evaluation covered "Year 1" of program implementation, districts had a truncated number of months between receiving the Notice of Grant Award (NOGA) and the end of the first implementation year. As a result, qualitative data in this report reflect an early startup period, during which districts were simultaneously learning program requirements, establishing implementation structures, and initiating GEAR UP activities. Findings should therefore be interpreted in the context of this abbreviated implementation timeline.



The findings presented in this brief highlight five cross-cutting themes that emerged consistently across interviews and focus groups across Year 1. Collectively, they suggest that districts entered the GEAR UP program with strong commitment to its goals; spent the first implementation period establishing the people, partnerships, and systems needed to support long-term implementation; and

remained committed to expanding opportunities for students despite the challenges of launching a complex, multi-year initiative. To protect the anonymity of school districts and personnel, districts are not referred to by name but according to a randomly generated number that serves as a pseudonym (e.g., District 1, District 2).

Stakeholders Began Year 1 with Strong Commitment to the GEAR UP Program and Its Potential



KEY FINDING

Districts entered the GEAR UP program with a shared commitment to its goals and a high degree of enthusiasm for its potential benefit to students.

Districts approached the first year of implementation with a high level of enthusiasm for the opportunities GEAR UP could provide. Participants from five districts, primarily district coordinators and district leaders, described the program's goals and objectives as clearly defined. At the school level, principals in three districts also expressed enthusiasm though indicated that they were still learning about the GEAR UP program and its requirements during startup. Across participants, optimism was accompanied by a realistic understanding that implementation was still in its earliest stages.

But even among those who were less familiar with day-to-day implementation efforts, there was broad agreement that GEAR UP addressed an important need and represented a valuable opportunity for students. Participants from eight of the nine districts described TX GEAR UP 2025 SG as an opportunity to broaden students' horizons and help them imagine futures that included college, technical training, military service, or other postsecondary pathways. One district coordinator reflected: "Anything we can do to show these students what the possibilities are ... it'll give them an advantage knowing what they have that they can reach for."

Participants reported a belief that GEAR UP funding gave districts additional resources to strengthen and build upon existing priorities to support students rather than introducing new

Stakeholders Began Year 1 with Strong Commitment to the GEAR UP Program and Its Potential



strategic directions. Participants also described family engagement as an essential part of preparing students for life after high school. Participants from four districts identified family engagement as a key implementation priority, describing plans to help families better understand graduation requirements, financial aid, college admissions, and career pathways so they could more effectively support students' educational decisions. Although many of these activities were still being planned during the abbreviated first year of implementation, participants consistently viewed families as important partners in helping students achieve long-term success.

Participants' previous experience also played an important role in establishing an understanding of and confidence in the program. Participants from six of the nine districts described prior work with initiatives such as Advancement Via Individual Determination, or AVID; dual-credit programs; career and technical education pathways; or other college and career readiness efforts.³ In addition, more than half of the 23 district participants interviewed had previous experience with GEAR UP, either in their current district or in earlier professional roles.

One district coordinator from District 7 who had previously worked in a prior GEAR UP district described seeing firsthand the difference the program made for students and wanting to bring those opportunities to a new district. That experience shaped both expectations for the GEAR UP program and confidence in its potential to benefit students.

Participants from seven districts described partnerships with colleges, universities, or community organizations that supported the program's goals. Participants also highlighted experienced educators, supportive district leadership, and established college and career readiness initiatives as important implementation assets. One district leader noted that leadership was already "in the mindset to embrace this and move forward with it," allowing the district to begin implementation with shared commitment and clear support.

Overall, findings suggest that districts entered implementation with a strong foundation. Existing experience, supportive leadership, and a shared commitment to expanding opportunities for students positioned districts well to launch program activities despite the abbreviated startup period.

— ” —

"I came from a district that had the GEAR UP grant... I got to see what it could do for kids. And I said, 'Okay, I want to take this with me somehow.'"

— District 7 Coordinator

— “ —



KEY FINDING

During the abbreviated startup period, districts worked to build the partnerships and make staffing decisions needed to support implementation over the course of the program.

For many districts, this first year of the program was less about fully implementing every planned activity and more about establishing the conditions needed for long-term success. Participants from seven of the nine districts identified the compressed startup timeline as the single greatest challenge impacting early implementation. Districts had only a few months between receiving the NOGA and the end of the first implementation year, which required them to learn program requirements, establish new partnerships, organize staffing, and begin implementation simultaneously.

Findings reflected a shared understanding that the startup period required districts to build new partnerships and make staffing decisions while simultaneously launching program activities. In seven districts, rather than creating parallel systems, participants described integrating GEAR UP activities into existing college and career readiness priorities and initiatives. As one district leader explained, “We know what the need is ... we have the plan ... it’s just the implementation.”

Participants also emphasized the importance of clear guidance during the startup period. Participants from two districts specifically

identified the GEAR UP grant manager’s handbook as a valuable implementation resource. One district coordinator noted that “the goals and objectives are very clearly outlined,” while another described the manager’s handbook as providing “all of the goals, all the performance objectives very clearly lined out.” District participants’ descriptions of startup support were consistent with TEA’s emphasis on providing regular communication, office hours, implementation guidance, and ongoing check-ins to help districts navigate program requirements during the compressed first year.

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“The goals and objectives are very clearly outlined... what we’re hoping to see by Year 1, by Year 2.”

— District 8 Coordinator

“I did not feel confident at first, but I am understanding and learning more about this and how it relates to the kids over this 7-year period.”

— District 4 Coordinator

“



The interviews also highlighted the different ways districts organized early implementation. Participants from five districts described implementation responsibilities as being shared across established leadership teams. Participants from four districts also described one or two individuals carrying much of the early implementation work while additional systems and processes were still being developed.

Participants viewed these differences as a reflection of local context and startup timing rather than an indication of districts' long-term capacity to implement the program.

In general, these findings reflect a period of organizational learning as much as program implementation. Districts were building relationships, refining plans, establishing routines, and learning how GEAR UP would function within their local context. While the pace of implementation varied, findings suggest that districts were laying the groundwork for more fully developed implementation in subsequent years.

Districts Viewed the Program's Focus on Academic Preparedness as a Foundation for Broader College and Career Readiness



KEY FINDING

Participants consistently described academic preparation, specifically Texas GEAR UP 2025 SG's focus on Algebra I, as a key part of a broader strategy to prepare students for success after high school.

Participants consistently connected academic preparation with exposure to future possibilities. Participants from eight of the nine districts described GEAR UP as an opportunity to help students begin thinking about life after high school earlier than they otherwise might. College visits, career exploration activities, guest speakers, and partnerships with colleges and community organizations were all described as important strategies for helping students see a wider range of educational and career pathways they might not have otherwise considered. Participants from seven districts also described partnerships with colleges, universities, or community organizations that supported these goals by expanding students' awareness of postsecondary opportunities and careers.

Districts Viewed the Program's Focus on Academic Preparedness as a Foundation for Broader College and Career Readiness



As in the previous grant cycles, the Texas GEAR UP 2025 SG places a strong emphasis on Algebra I during the early years of implementation. Participants from seven of the nine districts connected Algebra I success to broader college and career readiness goals. Rather than discussing mathematics in isolation, they described Algebra I as a gateway to advanced coursework, expanded postsecondary options, and greater confidence in students' academic abilities.

Across districts, one idea surfaced repeatedly: participants hoped that GEAR UP would change not only students' academic trajectories but also the opportunities available to them after graduation. Improved Algebra I outcomes were viewed as an important early indicator, but they were not the ultimate goal. Rather, participants saw academic success as opening doors to future educational and career opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach. One district coordinator reflected on that broader vision by describing GEAR UP's potential to create lasting change: "It changes the path of their life... it's going to impact that individual kid and then impact their children in the future... you're just changing that pattern."

Although districts had only a few months to begin implementation, findings suggest that districts understood the program's theory of action and were working to translate it into local implementation. Participants consistently described the required focus on Algebra I not as a narrow academic initiative, but as the first step in preparing students for long-term college, career, and life success.



— ” —

"It changes the path of their life ... you're just changing that pattern."

— District 1 Coordinator

— “ —





KEY FINDING

Districts shared a common commitment to GEAR UP, but implementation progressed at different rates because they entered the abbreviated startup period with different organizational structures, staffing capacity, and local circumstances.

Implementation progressed at different rates across districts. At one end of the continuum, districts had already established leadership teams, identified students to receive services, and begun purchasing materials or planning activities. At the other end, districts were still clarifying roles, filling key positions, and determining how responsibility for program implementation would be shared across the district. Participants from five districts described implementation teams that included multiple departments or stakeholder groups. Even among those districts with implementation teams well underway, key responsibilities were often still being defined. Participants from six of the nine districts described implementation responsibilities as still evolving during the startup period, reflecting variation in local context and capacity rather than differences in commitment to GEAR UP.

Staffing or leadership changes also affected implementation in five districts. Two districts experienced superintendent or administrative leadership changes during the startup period, while three were still determining who would assume responsibility for various program activities. Participants from eight of the nine districts described balancing GEAR UP implementation with existing leadership, instructional, counseling, or administrative responsibilities. District coordinators and principals frequently described implementing GEAR UP while simultaneously supporting other district priorities and initiatives.

Participants referenced responsibilities associated with curriculum implementation, teacher support, accountability requirements, and statewide initiatives such as LIFT, as well as the day-to-day demands of staffing schools and supporting students. TEA and TNTF described intentionally adapting technical assistance to align with districts' existing initiatives, including LIFT and other instructional improvement

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“I’m worried about missing something... with the amount of things that are on my plate, missing some piece that need to be taken care of.”

— District 9 Coordinator

“



efforts, to reduce duplication and strengthen implementation coherence. Particularly in smaller districts, participants noted that individuals often served in multiple roles, making it more challenging to dedicate time to implementation during the startup period.

Despite these differences, participants generally viewed the challenges they encountered as typical of the first year of a long-term program. Rather than questioning the value of the initiative, participants focused on identifying the support that would help districts build momentum as implementation continued.

Findings reflected substantial variation in implementation progress across districts. While some districts had already established leadership teams and launched early activities, others were still clarifying roles, filling key positions, or determining how program implementation responsibilities would be shared. Representatives from both TEA and TNTP observed this variation across the cohort, noting that districts differed considerably in how quickly implementation gained momentum.



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“The challenge has just been how fast we had to move once the NOGA got released.”
— District 1 Coordinator

“There’s quite a huge commitment ... they’re kind of, like, volleying the role of GEAR UP coordinator.”
— TNTP Representative

“



KEY FINDING

As districts moved beyond the startup period, participants identified opportunities to strengthen implementation through continued guidance, collaboration, and opportunities to learn from one another.

As participants looked ahead to Year 2, they described wanting supports that were practical rather than programmatic, reflecting a desire to build on the work already underway rather than fundamentally changing the direction of implementation.

Participants consistently described ongoing communication with TEA and TNTP as an important support needed for Year 2. Participants from eight districts valued technical assistance, office hours, regular communication, and written resources during startup, and anticipated needing continued guidance as implementation shifted from planning to day-to-day execution. Districts also expressed interest in practical implementation resources, such as examples, toolkits, workflows, and implementation guides that could support local decision-making.

Six districts specifically requested opportunities for cross-district learning, including sharing implementation strategies, challenges, and successful practices. Participants expressed interest in sharing implementation strategies; examples of local practice; and lessons learned related to staffing, family engagement, Algebra I supports, data use, and integration with existing college and career readiness initiatives. Participants suggested that regular opportunities to share lessons learned could reduce duplication of effort and help districts adapt successful strategies to their own local contexts. These priorities aligned with TEA's and TNTP's planned Year 2 supports, including ongoing coaching, regular district meetings, implementation resources, and expanded opportunities for districts to share strategies and lessons learned.

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“I think if anything would be helpful, it's hearing what other people do.”

— District 7 Coordinator

“The two liaisons from TEA have been really great ... open office hours... pick up the phone ... email ... getting right back to us.”

— District 1 Coordinator

“



Seven districts anticipated needing continued support with data collection, reporting, and using implementation data to guide local decision-making as Year 2 activities expanded. Participants anticipated that future technical assistance would be most useful if it addressed the practical realities of day-to-day implementation rather than initial orientation.

Findings suggest that districts are in the process of entering the next phase of implementation with a clearer understanding of both the program and their local needs. Building on the guidance and collaborative working relationships established with TEA and TNTP during the abbreviated first year, participants viewed continued communication, technical assistance, and peer learning as important strategies for maintaining momentum and strengthening implementation over time.

Summary and Implications



Findings from the first year of implementation suggest that participating districts are strongly committed to supporting students' college and career readiness. While implementation progress varied across districts, most participants described the current period as one focused on planning, relationship-building, and establishing the structures needed to support future implementation. Across stakeholder groups, there was broad agreement regarding the importance of strengthening mathematics preparation, particularly Algebra I readiness, while also expanding students' awareness of postsecondary and career opportunities. Although districts identified challenges related to staffing capacity, competing priorities, and data collection responsibilities, participants generally expressed optimism about GEAR UP's potential to support students and schools over the long term. As districts move from planning to more active implementation, continued attention to communication, technical assistance, and opportunities for cross-district collaboration may help address emerging questions and implementation challenges.

Districts described intentionally integrating GEAR UP into existing instructional improvement and college and career readiness efforts rather than implementing it as a stand-alone initiative. Participants discussed aligning GEAR UP with existing academic support initiatives, curriculum implementation, and additional College, Career, and Military Readiness structures to reduce duplication of effort and strengthen implementation coherence. Continued guidance on integrating GEAR UP within existing district priorities may help support sustained implementation as Year 2 activities expand.

At least five districts described implementation capacity as continuing to evolve during the abbreviated startup period. Participants discussed building implementation teams, clarifying staff roles, balancing GEAR UP responsibilities alongside existing duties, and, in some cases, filling key positions needed to support implementation. As Year 2 begins, continued check-ins regarding district implementation capacity may help technical assistance providers tailor support to local contexts and respond as staffing or organizational needs change. With respect to the evaluation of TX GEAR UP 2025 SG, next steps involve tracking student readiness for high school and postsecondary education to establish a baseline and monitor progress over time, especially as districts expand implementation. The evaluation will also continue documenting early implementation and service delivery to identify promising practices and implementation challenges, and to provide formative feedback in order to support continuous improvement.





Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation Questions

The evaluation questions addressed in this report are listed in Exhibit A1.

Exhibit A1. Texas (TX) GEAR UP 2025 State Grant (SG) Evaluation Questions

Evaluation Objective 1: Examine the Implementation of the TX GEAR UP 2025 SG
1.1: How are program leaders, staff, and partners implementing the key components of the program at each grantee district and campus?
1.2: To what degree are program participants engaging in key components of the TX GEAR UP 2025 SG?
1.3: What are effective practices and strategies for replication?
1.4: What challenges have stakeholders encountered during implementation?
1.5: How can TX GEAR UP 2025 SG implementation be strengthened?

Data Collection

ICF’s partners at Resources for Learning (RFL) conducted virtual site visits that included seven interviews and six focus groups across the nine districts participating in the TX GEAR UP 2025 SG. Data collection occurred between May 26, 2026, and June 10, 2026. During the virtual site visits, RFL conducted data collection in the form of interviews and focus groups. Overall, 23 individuals participated in interviews and focus groups across the 9 districts, including 10 coordinators and 9 principals. RFL additionally conducted five virtual interviews with TEA and their collaborating partner, TNTP, between June 1, 2026, and June 9, 2026.

Data Analysis

The evaluation team coded all qualitative data from site visits (in-person and virtual) and phone interviews according to a list of codes articulated in a codebook. The evaluation team developed the codebook based on *etic* codes (from the perspective of the evaluation team) aligned with the evaluation questions, program goals and objectives, and other key constructs from the interview/focus group protocols. As the team began coding, the team revised the codebook to include *emic* codes (from the perspective of the research participants), or themes that emerged based on the perceptions of participations. Two members of the evaluation team conducted the coding and had frequent check-ins to discuss new emic codes and other revisions to the codebook and to align interpretations of codes. Members of the evaluation team who led the interviews and focus groups conducted oversight of the coded data to ensure that the coding aligned with their interpretations and notes as well. Findings from the qualitative analysis are presented in the body of the report.



Evaluation Instruments

Coordinator and Administrator Protocol

Texas Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (TX GEAR UP) 2025 State Grant Evaluation Startup Interview Protocol Summer 2026 (Combined: Coordinators, Principals, Counselors)

Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Stakeholder Type: ☐ Coordinator ☐ Principal ☐ Counselor

- Introduce yourself: Introduce yourself as a representative of the ICF evaluation team and explain your role.
- Briefly discuss the purpose of the interview: The district/school is participating in the Texas Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant program, led by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The purpose of this interview is to learn about startup planning, early implementation, and perceptions of grant implementation. Because your program is in its early stages, we're especially interested in your planning process, priorities, and anticipated needs. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers. The interview will take approximately 30–45 minutes.
- Convey to the participant our confidentiality policy: (1) the interview is voluntary; (2) you can decline to answer any questions, or you can stop participating in the interview at any time without any consequences; (3) the information will be held in confidence by members of the ICF team to the extent permitted by law who have signed confidentiality agreements ensuring the protection of data; and (4) interview data will be maintained in secure areas.
- Ask permission to participate in the interview: Now that you have heard the interview's content and the confidentiality provisions, do you agree to participate?
- Ask permission to record the interview: To accurately capture your responses, I would like to record the interview. Only evaluation team members will have access to the recording. Transcripts of audio recordings will be provided to TEA at the conclusion of the study; however, these transcripts will be deidentified (i.e., identifiable information including names, roles, etc. will be redacted) prior to being shared. If you do not want the interview audio-recorded, we will not record it; we will take notes. We will not include your name(s) in these notes. Any information that could be used to identify you will be removed from transcripts before they are shared. Do I have permission to record the interview?
- Ask if they have any questions for you before you begin.
- Start recording if they consented.



Background and Context (~3 mins; ALL)

1. Let's start with your background and current role related to the GEAR UP grant program.
 - a. *How long have you been in your current role? With the district?*
 - b. *What experience do you have with GEAR UP or college access/readiness grants before, and how confident do you feel in your understanding of TX GEAR UP expectations?*
 - c. *How do you see yourself supporting GEAR UP programming, objectives, and activities?*
 - d. *Who else is involved in planning or implementing GEAR UP activities? What are their roles?*

District/School Past Experiences (~5 mins; ALL)

I'd like to know a little more about your district's past experiences with postsecondary education (2-year colleges, 4-year colleges, and/or technical schools) and career preparation—before your district received a GEAR UP grant. It's okay if you are new to the district and don't know this information. (NOTE: If they clearly have no institutional knowledge, move on to the next section)

2. Before receiving the current GEAR UP grant, what programs or strategies were in place to support college and career readiness?
 - a. *What worked well? What was difficult to sustain or less effective?*
3. What have been the biggest gaps or unmet needs related to college and career readiness?
 - a. *How do you hope or expect GEAR UP to address those challenges?*

GEAR UP Startup and Early Implementation (~25 mins)

Now let's talk briefly about what you know about GEAR UP, how ready your district/school is, and what you hope GEAR UP will do for your students.

Knowledge, Readiness, Expectations (ALL)

4. How clear are the expectations and requirements of the GEAR UP grant at this point?
 - a. *Are there any requirements that need clarification?*
5. What strengths does your district/school already have in place that will help you implement GEAR UP (e.g., partnerships, other college and career readiness initiatives)?
 - a. *What concerns do you have related to implementing GEAR UP grant activities?*
6. How do you expect GEAR UP activities to improve student outcomes?
 - a. *What specific changes do you hope to see in students?*
7. Do you anticipate any challenges with your current workload?

Okay, let's move on to where you are in the planning process. Remember, we know your program is in its early stages, so we're especially interested in your initial planning processes, and we understand that, if you are implementing, it is likely very preliminary.

Planning and Progress (ALL)

8. Where would you say your district/school currently is in the planning and early implementation process?
 - a. *What decisions have already been made? What is still undecided?*
 - b. *What challenges have you experienced so far or anticipate experiencing during the next several months?*
 - c. *What programs, projects, or grant-related processes have shown forward progress so far (e.g., approvals, purchasing steps, planning milestones), or are expected to move forward next?*



9. How have meetings and other supports from TEA aided in your planning process so far?
10. What types of support would be most helpful right now (e.g., guidance from TEA, technical assistance, staffing, partnerships, data systems)?
11. What types of activities or services are you currently planning to offer through GEAR UP?
 - a. *What is your timeline for launching initial activities?*
 - i. *What were the first activities and services you are planning to do? For example, do you have any summer activities planned?*
 - ii. *How are you deciding which activities to implement?*
12. Have you thought about how you will track student participation or outcomes?
 - a. *What systems or data will you rely on?*

Planning and Progress (COORDINATOR ONLY)

13. *For districts with multiple middle schools): How do you anticipate that GEAR UP implementation could differ, if at all, between the two participating middle schools?*
14. Have you identified or begun engaging potential partners (e.g., colleges, businesses, community organizations)?
 - a. *What role do you expect these partners to play?*
 - b. *What challenges do you anticipate or are you experiencing in building these partnerships?*
15. Have you established a relationship with any advising partners?

Input for Student Survey (~3 mins, ALL)

Let's move on to how some of the data we collect can support your implementation. We will administer student surveys as one way to support your implementation. We will be surveying the Class of 2031 students annually beginning in 2026–2027, and Grade 12 priority students in Years 4 and 5. We will deliver district- and school- specific findings back to your team to understand the evolving needs and experiences of students and help inform your planning.

16. With that in mind, what student survey information should we gather each year to help you strengthen grant implementation and improve student outcomes over time (e.g., awareness of college/career option, confidence and preparedness, family engagement, barriers or challenges—financial, academic, informational—and awareness of and experiences with GEAR UP activities and services)?

Wrap-Up (~2 mins, ALL)

Just a couple of final questions to wrap up and make sure you've had an opportunity to tell us everything.

17. What are you most excited about in terms of how GEAR UP will help address your students' needs?
 - a. What aspect of GEAR UP do you believe may have the greatest impact on students, schools, or districts?
 - b. What resources (from TEA, TNTP, or other) would best support you in the grant?
18. What else do we need to know related to GEAR UP in your district that we haven't asked?



TEA and TNTP Protocol

Texas Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (TX GEAR UP) 2025 State Grant Evaluation Startup Interview Protocol Summer 2026 (TEA, TNTP)

Estimated Time: 45–50 minutes

- Introduction: Introduce yourself as a representative of the ICF evaluation team and explain your role (i.e., Facilitator).
- Briefly discuss the purpose of the focus group/interview: The Texas GEAR UP program, led by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), aims to improve postsecondary education and career readiness in middle school and high school. To better understand how the program is working, TEA has contracted with ICF to conduct a focus group/interview with TEA program staff and TNTP involved in program implementation this year. The purpose of this focus group/interview is to better understand your role in the grant and perceptions about grant implementation. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers.
- Convey to each participant our confidentiality policy: (1) the focus group/interview is voluntary; (2) you can decline to answer any questions, or you can stop participating in the focus group/interview at any time without any consequences; (3) the information will be held in confidence by members of the ICF team, to the extent permitted by law, who have signed confidentiality agreements ensuring the protection of data; (4) focus group/interview data will be maintained in secure areas.
- Ask permission to participate in the focus group/interview: Now that you have heard about the content of this focus group/interview and the confidentiality provisions, do you consent to participate?
- Request permission to record the focus group/interview: To capture the discussion, I would like to record the session. Only evaluation team members will have access to the recording. If anyone prefers not to be recorded, we will take notes only. We will not include your name(s) in these notes. Any information that could be used to identify specific people will be removed from transcripts before they are shared. Do I have permission to record the interview?
- Ask if they have any questions for you before you begin.
- Start the recording if consent is given.



Both Groups: Background and Current Status (~8 mins)

1. Please tell me about your role related to the GEAR UP grant program.
 - a. *What role do you have in supporting GEAR UP programming, objectives, and activities at your organization?*
 - b. *For TNTP: Who else at your organization is involved in coordinating GEAR UP activities? What are their roles?*
2. How clear are the roles and responsibilities across the current district and school partners at this early stage of implementation?
3. How is information about GEAR UP being communicated across the current district and school partners?
4. How prepared do you feel to begin implementation?
 - a. *What are the biggest risks to successful early implementation?*

Both Groups: General Background Questions (~7 mins)

5. Who will you primarily work or collaborate with for Texas GEAR UP tasks or activities?
 - a. *How would you describe these collaborative relationships?*
 - b. *Are there additional partners you expect to engage?*
6. What are your goals and expectations for your work on the grant over the next three months? What outcomes do you hope to achieve?
 - a. *What outcomes do you expect for different stakeholders?*
 - i. *For TEA: Districts, grant coordinators, non-profit advising organizations, students, school staff, and parents/guardians*
 - ii. *For TNTP: School and district staff*
 - b. *What challenges do you anticipate?*

TEA Program Staff Only (~15–20 mins)

7. Please provide an overview of how the grant has been set up for Year 1.
 - a. *What is your perspective on how it has been set up and what services will be provided?*
 - b. *What do you anticipate will work well? What might you want to adjust?*
8. How is GEAR UP going to support implementation of the Effective Advising Framework?
 - a. *What is TEA's role in this implementation?*
 - b. *What are current challenges to implementation?*
9. What is your overall vision for TNTP or other similar partner's support through GEAR UP?
 - a. *How will they support academic rigor in general education and advanced courses?*
 - b. *How will they support family engagement?*
10. What specific activities do you anticipate TNTP will conduct?
 - a. *Will they conduct a needs assessment?*
 - b. *What, if any, professional development activities are they planning to deliver?*
 - c. *Will they provide coaching? If so, what will this look like? Who will receive coaching?*
 - d. *Can you talk about how TNTP's work with GEAR UP intersects with their work in districts that are also participating in LIFT and/or Bluebonnet implementation? What will the TNTP ELA, Math, and Family Engagement Specialists be doing?*



11. What is your overall vision for how College Possible will support GEAR UP?
 - a. *What is your goal for how the CoPilot data system will be used by districts? What about by TEA?*

TNTP Staff Only: (~15–20 mins)

12. First, I'd like to learn more about TNTP's experience with postsecondary education preparation programs or initiatives similar to GEAR UP.
 - a. *How has your organization historically worked with schools/districts to increase academic rigor in courses?*
 - b. *What lessons did you learn from this experience that you can apply to this new contract?*
13. What near-term activities do you anticipate providing?
 - a. *What is the process for planning services at each district? Do you plan to conduct a needs assessment?*
 - b. *What, if any professional development activities, do you have planned with districts? If so, can you describe the topics you anticipate addressing? How were these topics chosen prior to a needs assessment?*
 - c. *Will you provide coaching? To whom? What will this look like?*
14. Can you talk about your support for GEAR UP in relation to other initiatives and organizations in the academic rigor/college and career readiness space?
 - a. *Can you talk about how this work intersects with your support for GEAR UP districts with LIFT and/or Bluebonnet implementation?*
 - b. *What will your ELA, Math, and Family Engagement Specialists be doing?*
 - c. *Can you describe your partnership with the ESCs?*
15. Describe the support you have received from TEA GEAR UP staff so far.
 - a. *How has this support met your needs?*
 - b. *What additional support would you like to receive?*

ALL: Final Reflections (~5 mins)

16. Which components of the GEAR UP program do you think have the greatest potential to influence postsecondary education and/or career readiness?
 - a. *Why do you think this will have the greatest impact?*
17. Is there anything else about GEAR UP grant implementation that you think I should know?

Thank you for your time!