High School Early Start: 2009-10
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At a Glance

High School Early Start provided incoming ninth graders in Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) Title I comprehensive high schools with eight half days of instruction. The program presented hard-to-master objectives, concepts, and content taught during the first six weeks of the curriculum in Algebra I, Geometry, Biology, and English Language Arts, and included an hour of enrichment activities each day.

The purpose of this evaluation was to describe the Early Start program and to measure its effectiveness in improving achievement and attendance. First, this evaluation described the general characteristics of the Early Start program, implementation, staff, and participants. Second, the evaluation examined the effectiveness of the program at increasing participants’ academic achievement in the covered courses and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exams. Finally, the evaluation examined the effect of program participation on attendance.

Staff and Student Characteristics

There were 229 Early Start staff, including 196 teachers and 33 non teaching staff. Early Start staff was more likely to be African American and less likely to be Hispanic than non participating district staff, and gender demographics of program staff were roughly representative of Dallas ISD staff as a whole. Early Start teachers had less experience than other teachers in the district. Twenty-four percent of Early Start teachers had one or two years experience, and 21 percent had three to five years experience. Ten percent of Early Start teachers had more than 20 years of experience compared to 22 percent of non Early Start teachers. Of the 196 teachers who were involved in the Early Start program, 64 percent had bachelors’ degrees and 28 percent had masters’ degrees. The distribution of Early Start teachers’ highest degrees was generally representative of the district.

Although daily program attendance totals fluctuated between 1,204 and 1,570 students each day, student rosters included only 954 student identification numbers. When non ninth graders, students from non Title I schools, and students between schools were excluded, the sample for analysis included 799 participants. A larger percentage of African American students and a smaller percentage of Hispanic students attended the Early Start program than one would predict based on district demographics. Participants were less likely to have exited the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) program and were also more likely to have English as their first language than their peers. LEP demographics reflected that a disproportionate number of Early Start participants were African American. Early Start participants’ gender, special education status, and socioeconomic status were roughly representative of demographics of students across the district.

A prior achievement variable was created using students’ first attempt TAKS scores from the 2008-09 school year. Based on these scores, students were divided into quintiles one through five, with the fifth quintile identifying the highest achievers and the first quintile identifying the lowest achievers. Early Start was primarily attended by members of the first and second (lowest) quintiles (63%). Only 21 percent of program participants were in the fourth and fifth (the highest) quintiles, whereas 36 percent of non participants were higher achievers of the same caliber. The Early Start program was successful at engaging lower achievers in an academic summer program, as the majority of participants were in the lowest quintiles.

Academic Achievement - Covered Courses

Although Early Start participants appeared to pass covered courses at rates near or above their peers after the first six weeks of the school year, any gains they made dissipated by the end of the semester (with the exception of AP Geometry, which had a particularly small sample size). Over the course of the school year, pass rates in covered courses declined for participating and non participating ninth graders. Participants’ pass rates dropped most dramatically between the first six weeks and the first semester grading periods in Biology courses and Algebra I courses, the courses with the largest sample sizes.
Academic Achievement - TAKS

Early Start participants were less likely to pass Reading and Math TAKS than their non participating peers. This may have been due to the participant population; the prior achievement demographic variable suggested that Early Start participants were lower achievers prior to entering the program. Eighty-one percent of participants passed the Reading TAKS test, compared to 87 percent of their non participating peers, and 40 percent of participants pass the Math TAKS, compared to 58 percent of their non participating peers. More than half of Early Start participants failed at least one of their TAKS tests (62%), while 44 percent of their non participating peers failed at least one TAKS test. The average scale score for Early Start participants was 46.52 points below the average scale score of their non participating peers (2130.28 vs. 2176.80, respectively). It appears that the Early Start program did not provide participants with sufficient instruction to allow them to score at or above the level of their non participating peers nine months after the program’s completion.

Attendance

Early Start students had higher attendance rates than their non participating peers over the course of the 2009-10 school year. This remained true at the end of the six week grading period, the first semester, and the full year (see Figure 1).

![Attendance Chart]

Figure 1. Early Start Participants and Non Participants Average Attendance Percentages

It is important to note that participants had high attendances rates during the prior school year (2008-09), before attending Early Start. This suggests that improved attendance was not an outcome of Early Start; however, the program may have helped incoming ninth graders maintain their positive attendance behaviors.

Recommendations

It appears that participants were high effort, lower achieving students both prior to and following attending the Early Start program. Their high level of effort was exhibited by their high rates of attendance, and their lower achievement was demonstrated by the prior achievement demographic variable and by their lower covered course pass rates and TAKS scores. While participants appeared to experience improved passing rates in covered courses at the end of the first six weeks, any improvement dissipated by the end of the first semester.

These findings suggest that Early Start succeeded in attracting the appropriate participants to its program. Students who attend school regularly and were willing to attend an academic program during the summer may be more willing to put in the time to learn than others, despite how they have achieved in the past. Additionally, participants did benefit from previewing of the first six weeks of curriculum during the summer, as reflected in their passing rates at six weeks.

Early Start program management should consider adding a program component that continues through the school year. Results show that participants made academic gains when they were learning the material for the second time (first during the summer program, and for a second time during the first six weeks of the school year). If participants receive previews of upcoming curriculum all year long, they may be able to maintain their gains. Adding an afterschool or weekend component to Early Start during the school year would allow the program to continue exposing participants to upcoming curriculum before it is taught in the classroom. While this is certainly a substantial undertaking, the cost would be reasonable considering the existing infrastructure (classrooms, curricula) and would primarily consist of hiring teachers. The full year Early Start program could be piloted on selected campuses prior to being rolled out to all Title I schools.