Texas Priority and Focus Schools Program: 2015-2016

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At-a-Glance

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed by Congress in 1965. The reauthorization amending ESEA via the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) aimed to close the achievement gap between groups of students by requiring greater accountability and offering increased flexibility and choice. At the close of 2015, Congress passed and the President signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), an overhaul of federal education policy. Section 1003(a) of the ESEA authorizes state education agencies to issue funds to local education agencies in order to address the needs of schools identified for improvement, and thereby improve student performance. The Division of School Improvement and Support at the Texas Education Agency (TEA) administers school improvement programs under ESSA, including the Texas Title I 1003(a) priority and focus school grants.

Scope of Evaluation Department Services

Evaluation staff assists campuses with grant applications, especially with regard to writing evaluation components and annual goals, as well as in the completion of required annual compliance reports.

Program Description

Campuses were first identified as priority or focus in 2013-2014, and have remained on the list for three years. Due to new transition requirements from the United States Department of Education (USDE) related to ESSA, Texas will maintain this list of priority and focus campuses through 2016-2017.

Priority schools were identified as being among the lowest-ranking Title I schools in the state based on proficiency on the statewide reading and mathematics assessments, and graduation rates. Texas priority schools included Tier I or Tier II school improvement grant (SIG) schools, schools with graduation rates less than 60 percent, and the lowest achieving schools, ranked by the difference between school performance and proficiency targets. The total number of priority schools equaled five percent of Title I campuses in Texas.

Priority schools were required to engage in the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) continuous improvement process in alignment with the ESEA turnaround principles and Critical Success Factors (CSFs), to prepare and implement a targeted improvement plan to address and correct areas of campus low performance, and most were assigned a Professional Service Provider (PSP). Districts also designated a leadership team, including a district coordinator of school improvement (DCSI). The PSPs and the DCSI worked together to support the campus through the improvement process and to identify interventions. Finally, The DCSI and priority campus principals were required to attend the annual Advancing Improvement in Education (AIE) conference.

Beginning in August 2015, priority schools having improved in performance and who were no longer identified as improvement required by the state accountability ratings were classified as priority-progress. All remaining schools that did not meet that criteria were identified as priority.

Priority-progress schools continued to follow all required interventions, but were not required to submit the campus’ midyear progress reports of their targeted improvement plan. Priority progress schools were only required to submit an initial Targeted Improvement Plan and End-of-Year reporting on the implementation of the plan.

In 2015-2016, Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) had 12 campuses identified as priority schools, and four identified as priority-progress. These campuses were eligible to receive $153,808 per year in order to implement the program. The grant period ran from October 1, 2015 to September 30, 2016.

Focus schools were Title I schools that had the widest gaps in student performance between student groups. Schools were ranked based on the largest gaps of performance between student groups and the annual measurable outcomes target of 75 percent. Ten percent of Title I schools, not otherwise identified as priority schools, were identified as focus schools using this methodology.

Focus schools implemented interventions based on seven critical success factors, which referenced the United States Department of Education turnaround principles: improving academic performance, increasing the use of quality data to drive instruction, increasing leadership effectiveness, increasing learning time, increasing parent and community involvement, improving school climate, and increasing teacher quality. Schools were required to designate a district and campus contact for focus support and
interventions, and to work with the local Educational Service Center (ESC) to assess progress and complete and submit activity documentation, as well as to participate in consultations or two focus school support services or events with their ESC.

Beginning in August 2015, focus schools having improved in performance and who were no longer identified as improvement required by the state accountability ratings were classified as focus-progress. All remaining schools that did not meet that criteria were identified as focus.

Focus-progress schools engaged in the TAIS continuous improvement process and communications with their ESC, but were not required to participate in consultation or two focus school support services or events with their ESC.

In 2015-2016, Dallas ISD had 16 campuses identified as focus schools, and 10 campuses identified as focus-progress. These campuses were eligible to receive $17,000 per year in order to implement the program.

**2015-2016 Expenditures**

The majority of priority and focus campuses’ grant funds were spent on supplies and materials, which included technology, software, supplemental instructional materials and supplies, building literacy libraries, professional development book studies, assessment preparation workbooks, and other supplemental supplies for professional development. Expenditures from this category totaled $1,723,798, or 63 percent of total spending.

The second largest category of expenditure from the priority and focus school grant was payroll, comprising 28 percent of the total spending, at $756,174. These positions were largely teachers, campus instructional coaches, and teacher’s assistants who specialized in campuses’ lowest performing areas (mathematics or reading). Positions were added in some cases to assist with after-school tutoring or summer programming. Five campuses hired social workers or community liaisons to address improving campus climate and increasing parent and community involvement goals.

Six percent of the grant funds, $173,879, were spent on other operating costs. This category included travel for professional development. Representatives from priority campuses attended the AIE conference as a required intervention activity. The remainder of funds in this category were used for travel and/or supplemental pay for content-driven and school climate professional development sessions.

Professional and contracted services (services purchased from other district departments such as the graphics department, transportation for after-school tutoring and enrichment programs, and contracts for consultants providing training) comprised three percent of expenditures, at $59,795.

**Figure 1: 2015-2016 Overall Priority and Focus Grant Expenditures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supplies and Materials</th>
<th>Payroll</th>
<th>Other operating cost (Travel)</th>
<th>Professional and Contracted Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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**The Future of Priority and Focus Grants**

The 2016-2017 list of Texas priority and focus campuses will contain all campuses originally identified as focus or priority in 2013-2014. The 2017-2018 year presents the next opportunity for the state to formulate and implement exit criteria.

For 2016-2017, Dallas ISD will have nine campuses identified as priority schools, and seven identified as priority-progress. Additionally, Dallas ISD will have 10 campuses identified as focus schools, and 16 campuses identified as focus-progress.

These campuses will be eligible to receive $121,933 per priority and focus school and $20,000 per priority-progress and focus-progress school. The grant period will run from October 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017.

**Recommendations**

Campuses and the district should have a sustainability plan in place for campuses, especially regarding personnel: Campuses should have a long-term strategy that considers what the impact will be without these grant funded activities, and how the district and campuses can moderate that impact. This is especially true for priority-progress and focus-progress campuses, who with sustained achievement during the 2016-2017 year, can expect to exit the lists.

For more information, contact Program Evaluation at 972-925-6457.