

**Autism Grant Program:
Annual Progress Report**

July 2022

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Agency Mission

The mission of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) is to serve as a resource, partner, and advocate for Texas higher education, resulting in a globally competitive workforce that positions Texas as an international leader.

Agency Vision

The THECB will be recognized as an international leader in developing and implementing innovative higher education policy to accomplish our mission.

Agency Philosophy

The THECB will promote access to and success in quality higher education across the state with the conviction that access and success without quality is mediocrity and that quality without access and success is unacceptable.

The THECB's core values are:

Accountability: We hold ourselves responsible for our actions and welcome every opportunity to educate stakeholders about our policies, decisions, and aspirations.

Efficiency: We accomplish our work using resources in the most effective manner.

Collaboration: We develop partnerships that result in student success and a highly qualified, globally competent workforce.

Excellence: We strive for excellence in all our endeavors.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age or disability in employment or the provision of services.

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Introduction: Autism Grant Program

The 84th, 85th, and 86th Texas Legislatures appropriated \$8.1 million to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to make competitive grant awards to Texas public and private general academic institutions that conduct research and/or provide treatment to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In 2021, the 87th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, continued support for the program by appropriating \$7.41 million to the THECB and expanded eligibility by authorizing the participation of Texas health-related institutions and independent universities. The General Appropriations Act, Senate Bill 1, Article III, Rider 44, directed the THECB to offer the following three categories of funding to eligible institutions:

- Parent-directed Treatment – \$2,055,000 total available in each fiscal year for research centers serving a combined total of at least 750 children with ASD annually through Parent-directed treatment methods. The amount available represents a 5% reduction from Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, 2017, and 2019 appropriations.
- Board Certified Behavior Analyst Training for Teachers/Paraprofessionals – \$950,000 total available in each fiscal year to autism research centers that serve a combined total of at least 2,547 children with ASD per year by training teachers and/or paraprofessionals. Teachers and paraprofessionals may be in public or private institutions, teaching prekindergarten through 12th grade.
- Research, Development, and Evaluation of Innovative Autism Treatment Models – \$700,000 total available in each fiscal year to one or more autism research centers to research, develop, and evaluate innovative autism treatment models that provide treatment to the greatest number of children with ASD.

The THECB administers the Autism Grant Program (AGP) through a competitive grant application process. Grant recipients provide treatments through multiple approaches: conventional treatments (behavioral analysis), innovative treatments, treatments in the public school system, and treatments in the home environment with parents and caregivers.

Since the start of the program in FY 2016, the AGP grants have served a total of 58,795 children over five rounds of grant awards to institutions more than twice the minimum target. Over this period, the AGP has undertaken the following activities:

- The initial ASD grant awards were made in all three funding categories in FY 2016. Grant recipients treated 17,229 children with ASD in the first grant cycle (2016-2018), which ended in June 2018.
- A second round of awards was made to support Parent-directed Treatment in FY 2017. The initial AGP grants ended in June 2018, and the second set of grant awards for the Parent-directed Treatment ended in June 2019. An additional 917 children with ASD were treated during this second grant period (2017-2019).
- A third round of ASD grant awards was made in all three funding categories in FY 2018, ending in June 2020. This third grant cycle (2018-2020) allowed for the treatment of an additional 22,657 children with ASD.
- A fourth round of AGP grant awards was made to support Parent-directed Treatment in FY 2019. The fourth round ended in December 2020 and served 6,380 additional children with ASD.
- A fifth round of ASD grant awards was made in all three funding categories in FY 2020, ending in June 2022. As of March 2022, this fifth grant cycle has served 11,558 additional children with ASD for a combined total of 58,795 children with ASD served since the program began in 2016. Individual grants have received no-cost extensions of various lengths, depending on the circumstances and unexpended grant funding, particularly as it pertains to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and/or the statewide freeze storm in February 2021.

Table 1. Autism Grant Program Categories and Service, May 2021 through March 2022

Autism Grant Program Category	Amount Awarded	Children Served	Teachers/ Paraprofessionals
Parent-directed Treatment	\$4,500,000	1,207	n/a
Behavior Analyst Training for Teachers/Paraprofessionals	\$1,900,000	9,929	1,416
Innovative Autism Treatment Models	\$1,400,000	422	n/a

Source: AGP grantee required reports

The AGP has a target for its recipients to serve a combined 8,094 children with ASD for grants awarded in FYs 2019, 2020, and 2021, or 20,235 children since the program began in 2016. The program is exceeding its targets for the Parent-directed Treatment (minimum 750 each FY) and Behavior Analyst Training for Teachers/Paraprofessionals (minimum 2,547 each FY).

The AGP also included \$150,000 per fiscal year for administrative costs, which the THECB uses to support staff salaries, external reviewers, and other related administrative costs.

Program Development

Rules for the AGP were established using the THECB’s negotiated rulemaking process in 2015 with input from stakeholders, including representatives from Texas public universities, the Texas Autism Research and Resource Center, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, and the Texas Council on Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders. Following the negotiated rulemaking process, the THECB adopted rules for the program in April 2016. Rules are codified in Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Chapter 6, Subchapter K. The THECB webpage for the Autism Grant Program is www.highered.texas.gov/AGP.

Review, Assessment, and Selection Process

The AGP is a competitive grant, and applications are reviewed by THECB staff and external expert reviewers. To assist in the selection process, the THECB contracted with two external reviewers, one with primary expertise in parent-based treatment, and one with primary expertise in teacher/paraprofessional training. Another external reviewer from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission with expertise in ASD grant projects volunteered and participated in the review process.

Each application was reviewed by a three-member team comprised of the THECB grant administrator, an additional THECB staff member, and an external content expert reviewer.

Proposals were assessed based on criteria described in the Request for Applications (RFA), including the projected number of children with ASD to be served, feasibility of the timeline, attainability of the goals, long-term influence of the project past the grant period, management structure, plans for evaluation, sufficiency and economy of the budget, and qualifications of the directors and key staff. The THECB staff compiled the assessment results and made recommendations for funding to the Commissioner of Higher Education. The commissioner reviewed the information and finalized award selection for funding.

Fiscal Years 2018-2020

In May 2018, an RFA was released with funding available for all three categories. The following projects were selected for funding by category. Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, 10 of the 12 awards were granted a no-cost extension of various lengths, according to their activities and unspent money, to continue grant activities up to one year past the original grant end date, one of which remains active (Texas A&M University, Teacher/Paraprofessional Training).

Parent-directed Treatment

In the Parent-directed Treatment category, the THECB funded the following six projects:

1. Baylor College of Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine/Texas Children’s Hospital Autism Center

The project offered implementation of a parent-led, flexible, individually tailored cognitive-behavioral treatment intervention for children with autism and anxiety and examines the effectiveness of stepped-care behavioral interventions for anxiety in children with autism.

Project accommodations included conducting baseline assessments remotely to allow families to enroll without increasing their risk of COVID-19 exposure. Transitioning to telepsychiatry addressed many COVID-related challenges. The success of recruitment efforts allowed many families to receive treatment during the most recent reporting period. A significant number of families responded positively to treatment, and outcomes at post-treatment assessments tended to generally reflect improvement among participants over corresponding scores at baseline and mid-treatment assessments.

Total award: \$500,000

Expenditures to date: \$500,000

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 120

Parent/children pairs served to date: 96

2. Baylor University, Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities

The project provided high-quality parent training in evidence-based practices to rural families through a six-week program, for a total of 12 visits and 18 hours consisting of frequent visits with a parent coach.

Project progress was presented at the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities Consortium in January 2020, the Association for Behavior Analysis International Autism Conference in February 2020, and at the Texas Association of Behavior Analysis Regional Conference in April 2020. The project received tremendous community support. Numerous partnerships with service providers were facilitated by project leaders to assist with family recruitment.

Total award: \$278,456

Expenditures to date: \$277,053

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 100

Parent/children pairs served to date: 86

3. Texas A&M University, Center of Disability and Development

The project offered a program in the home environment and online to train parents in communication strategies for their children with ASD. The program expanded its reach to recruit and prioritize families from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, rural areas, and children with severe ASD.

The project serviced families in 42 Texas counties. Recruiting initiatives included flyers in Spanish and updated virtual recruitment materials via social media, as well as distribution to independent school districts, organizations, parent/family support groups, early childhood intervention services programs, and ASD service providers throughout Texas to recruit more widely across the state. Recruiting efforts included an emphasis on rural and border areas that may not otherwise have access to high-quality services.

Total award: \$500,000
Expenditures to date: \$499,872
Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 168
Parent/children pairs served to date: 208

4. University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL), Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities

The project built upon a prior THECB autism grant and offered communication and behavior management assessment training to Houston-area caregivers of individuals diagnosed with ASD with six components to the program: 1) Behavior over Breakfast, 2) Connecting the Dots, 3) Verbal Behavior Clinic, 4) Severe Behavior Disorders Research Clinic, 5) Texas Children's Hospital Behavior Analysis Program, and 6) UHCL Verbal Behavior Clinic Telehealth.

Project leaders developed a handbook and research programs due to the project's success. Family participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive, citing the knowledge, friendliness, and understanding nature of project representatives.

Total award: \$497,996
Expenditures to date: \$497,677
Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 165
Parent/children pairs served to date: 169

5. The University of Texas at Dallas, Development of Social Cognition Laboratory, School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences

The project investigated two mechanisms of social impairment in older adolescents with autism that current psychosocial programs fail to address: 1) exclusionary social environments and 2) underactive neural responses in the "social brain." The goal is to address these mechanisms to assist with real-world future functioning to secure and maintain employment, succeed in college, and develop satisfying personal and professional relationships.

The project achieved documented and anecdotal success. Several typically developing participants expressed increased interest in autism after their participation completed and asked many follow-up questions, speaking to one of the project's goals of improving autism understanding and acceptance in typically developing peers. One of many of the project's published papers detailing real-world social interaction between autistic and non-autistic adults received tremendous attention, both among researchers and community members. The project also received significant favorable feedback from participants, demonstrating anecdotal progress.

Total award: \$305,130
Expenditures to date: \$268,906
Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 154
Parent/children pairs served to date: 84

6. The University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley, College of Education Special Education Research Consortium

The project delivered evidence-based training to help develop parent capacities (including Individualized Education Program knowledge), connections, cognition, and confidence to generate a community of autism resources and support.

The project was accepted for a prestigious opportunity to present at the Center for Applied Special Technology, which has long been recognized as the center for accessible learning. Parent participants reported that they felt project participation helped to prepare them for the effects of the COVID-19

pandemic. Parent participants also cited the importance of project representative support in helping to improve the transition to shelter-in-place orders.

Total award: \$500,000

Expenditures to date: \$410,107

Parent/children projected to be served: 190

Parent/children served to date: 186

Teacher/Paraprofessional Training

In the Teacher/Paraprofessional Training Category, the THECB funded four applications:

1. Sam Houston State University, Low Incidence Disabilities and Autism Program

The project offered a training model for educators who work with children with autism and who are interested in learning to write and implement a behavior intervention plan derived from the results of a functional behavior assessment to avoid non-prescriptive, blanket treatments that result in costly, improper interventions that delay or prevent positive outcomes.

Project representatives trained representatives from each of the 20 education service centers (ESCs) across the state. A "Trainer of Trainers" model was used to allow ESC representatives to train educators in their respective regional public school districts. Training materials were continuously revised as feedback was obtained from ESC specialists in the field. Pandemic-related restrictions caused significant delays in serving students and teachers, and in expending grant funds.

Total award: \$305,366

Expenditures to date: \$ 270,323

Children projected to be served: 4,200

Children served to date: 1,930

Teachers projected to be served: 820

Teacher served to date: 193

2. Texas A&M University, Center on Disability and Development

The project provides an introductory online learning management training and has developed intermediate and advanced training for Texas professionals in private and public educational institutions who provide services to children with autism. To date, 33 training modules have been created and updated on various topics. The modules have been offered through a training platform, and seven of the modules have been translated into Spanish.

The project aims to serve as a timely resource during the pandemic, when many educators are dependent on online options for professional development and a surge of teacher retirements has led to experienced teachers being replaced with new educators who are often inexperienced in working with children with autism.

Given that the recruitment of educators for fieldwork continues to be challenging during the constantly changing school dynamics due to COVID-19, project representatives are using additional targeted advertisements to expand project reach to underserved areas. Various email and social media platform outreach efforts have resulted in reaching over 12,600 people, namely educators, in at least 33 school districts in 93 counties to date.

Total award: \$475,000

Expenditures to date: \$409,169

Children projected to be served: 1,580

Children served to date: 7,144

Teachers projected to be served: 308
Teachers served to date: 684

3. Texas Tech University (TTU), Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research

The project offered initial training of multiple ESC autism specialists as part of a Trainer of Trainers program during a three-day, intensive workshop alongside TTU faculty and staff to learn skills specific to training teachers.

Scheduling for overwhelmed ESC personnel remained a challenge to project implementation, namely due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. An extended virtual training model across three days was created to avoid educators having to interrupt their instruction time, which was a significant challenge with COVID-19 restrictions for schools. Project teacher participants shared their intent to increase their knowledge regarding behavior analysis and addressing problem behavior in the classroom, and several have applied to graduate programs for an advanced degree.

Total award: \$475,000
Expenditures to date: \$ 468,093
Children projected to be served: 8,000
Children served to date: 11,729
Teachers projected to be served: 400
Teachers served to date: 385

4. University of Houston-Clear Lake, Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities

The project was an extension and modification of a 2016 THECB autism grant that offers teachers and paraprofessionals training and classroom consultation services on effective practices for students with autism, with a particular focus on understanding and managing problem behavior.

Satisfaction surveys indicated participants were highly satisfied with the trainings and overall program. Consistency was observed across comments indicating that this training should be available for all special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Data indicated all participants demonstrated what they learned at the trainings with high integrity, increasing the likelihood of correctly implementing the procedures and effectively managing problem behavior in their classrooms.

Total award: \$173,300
Expenditures to date: \$171,566.97
Children projected to be served: 450
Children served to date: 487
Teachers projected to be served: 200
Teachers served to date: 202

Innovative Treatment Models

In the Innovative Treatment category, the THECB provided funding for two awards:

1. The University of Texas at Dallas/Callier Autism Treatment Research Center

The project offered research on the effectiveness of visual-based early intervention strategies to improve social interaction, attention, and play skills in economically/culturally diverse children younger than age 5 up to preschool.

The project reported strong results, with students displaying measurable improvement in eye contact, social engagement, and verbal reciprocity. Project leaders shared findings in national and international peer-

reviewed journals and conferences. As a result, the project had an positive impact on early intervention programs across the state.

The project trained approximately 563 early childhood intervention therapists from at least 20 early childhood intervention programs across the state to implement the program. In addition, a total of 4,563 parent manuals were accessed by early childhood intervention agencies.

Total award: \$882,261

Expenditures to date: \$882,261

Children projected to be served: 400

Children served to date: 425

2. The University of Texas at San Antonio, Psychological Assessment and Consultation Center (San Antonio Applied Behavior Analysis Research Consortium)

The purpose of the project was to pilot an innovative evaluation and treatment procedure to facilitate early identification and intervention of infants (0-18 months) and toddlers (18-36 months) “at risk” for autism.

As a result of robust enthusiasm for the project, a second site was opened to allow all project participants to be centrally located. The original site was also relocated to allow for an additional treatment room, larger research workspace, and a caregiver training room in a newly renovated university building. Multiple local media releases led to increased interest in the program.

Parents reported the project’s impact as follows: “Without you all, I could not imagine how behind they would be right now. I’m forever grateful to each and every one of you,” and “Words can’t express how grateful we are to you and everybody there that helped with our daughter in her diagnosis process...” Many participants reported that they were given project contact information by previous participants who were greatly impacted by the project and were excited to recommend it to their friends and family members. During Autism Acceptance Month festivities, a participant’s older brother prepared a tremendously impactful speech thanking the project team for providing support, acceptance, and care of his younger sibling.

Total award: \$1,251,063

Expenditures to date: \$ 1,251,063

Children projected to be served: 75

Children served to date: 113

Fiscal Years 2019-2020

In FY 2019, \$1,787,269 was available to make additional awards under the Parent-directed Treatment category. A second RFA was issued in December 2018. Ten applications were received for Parent-directed Treatment, and seven were recommended and selected for awards. Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, four of the seven awards were granted a no-cost extension of various lengths, according to their activities and unspent money, to continue grant activities up to one year past the original grant end date, two of which remain active (Baylor College of Medicine and Baylor University).

Parent-directed Treatment

In the Parent-directed Treatment category, the THECB funded the following seven applications:

1. Baylor College of Medicine, Center of Disability and Development

The project aims to improve access to anxiety-focused, parent-led, therapist-assisted (PLTA) cognitive behavioral therapy for parents of youth with ASD. Key goals include evaluating the effectiveness of two models of telehealth PLTA treatment delivery, determining for whom each treatment option works best, understanding parental treatment preferences, and examining cost-effectiveness of the interventions.

Project representatives receive significant program interest from continued recruitment efforts and increasing encouraging feedback from participants in the program. This project is timely to serve the needs of youth with ASD and anxiety during the pandemic, given the fully remote nature of the program. Project representatives are currently developing their first peer-reviewed publication.

Project representatives reported positive family member feedback that included various reports of consistent improvement in the home environment across the entire family dynamic, leading to a higher quality of life. One participant who presented with severe anxiety rated his worry as a zero upon nearing the end of his treatment and said he was better able to cope when unexpected events occurred. Additionally, the child was

able to reach a milestone regarding a water phobia by eventually allowing water on his face/head during bath time per the project's exposure therapy.

The project received a no-cost extension until December 2021 to use funds that experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$300,000

Expenditures to date: \$300,000

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 190

Parent/children pairs served to date: 125

2. Baylor University, Center for Developmental Disabilities

The project provides parent coaching in evidence-based interventions to families using telehealth technology. A key goal is to recruit families living in rural areas (at least 75% of total participants).

Project representatives report elevated interest among graduate students to serve on the project as graduate research assistants, receiving more applications than expected for those positions.

Based on collected data, the program resulted in caregivers learning how to implement evidence-based practices with their children, and those interventions yielded improvements for more than half of the goals targeted. Furthermore, these gains were often attained in a relatively brief period, indicating that the program is effective at improving individualized goals. Project representatives aim for the results dissemination to improve the quality of care provided to children with autism spectrum disorder.

In 2020, project representatives presented preliminary project results at the Association for Behavior Analysis International Autism Conference, and at the Texas Association of Behavior Analysis Regional Conference to positive responses. Additionally, a project manuscript was published in the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis.

The project received a no-cost extension until December 2021 to use funds that experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$212,409

Expenditures to date: \$208,596

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 80

Parent/children pairs served to date: 74

3. Texas A&M University, Center of Disability and Development

The project served Spanish-speaking families, trained community service providers serving Spanish-speaking families, improved parent emotional well-being, and increased language and literacy skills of Spanish-speaking children with ASD.

The project used evidence-based strategies of story-based instruction, augmentative and alternative communication, conversation expansion, and positive behavior supports. The project received a no-cost extension until August 2021 to serve more families and children in the intended modalities that were interrupted with restrictions caused by COVID-19.

Based on the work developed in this project, an internal \$30,000 grant was awarded to conduct an experimental research study to examine the efficacy of the culturally adapted Spanish stories on language and early reading outcomes of children with autism and intellectual disabilities. Project representatives continue to prepare and submit for publication two parent/practitioner-friendly articles in state and/or national periodicals.

Total award: \$191,161

Expenditures to date: \$176,004
Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 115
Parent/children pairs served to date: 313

4. Texas Tech University, The Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research

The project was a mobile outreach unit, allowing service to parents across all areas of West Texas, with a specific focus on rural and migrant families, as well as families who do not have the resources available to receive services (low socioeconomic, children in foster care, etc.).

The project served rural county school districts in [Education Service Center](#) Regions 9, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 - essentially the western half of the state. During the process of providing parents and caretakers with information regarding resources available to them throughout the state, project representatives found that only two of the people contacted were aware of state resources. Parents also were provided resources to access mental health support that met their personal needs.

Telehealth services for West Texas-area families proved to be very beneficial to a substantial number of families who demonstrated an increase in their child's skillset by working collaboratively to learn and teach their child new skills. A substantially high number of participants were involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) in some manner. Project representatives worked closely with both CPS caseworkers and caregivers to provide trainings to help facilitate reunification due to home removal or for families were at high risk of that type of event.

The project attracted statewide and national recognition. The project received a no-cost extension until September 2021 to use funds that experienced expending delays due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$300,000
Expenditures to date: \$ 277,503
Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 1,100
Parent/children pairs served to date: 5,586

5. University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL), Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities

The project built upon a prior THECB autism grant to provide communication and behavior management assessment and training to caregivers of individuals diagnosed with ASD, with two components to the proposed program: 1) Behavior over Breakfast and 2) Connecting the Dots.

Project representatives were invited by Houston Independent School District, the largest school district in Texas, to speak at their "World Autism Day" in April 2020. The waiting list continually grew and included parents referred by other parents, highlighting the value of the project to the community. Families expressed gratitude for the services received and the progress their children made.

Total award: \$252,525
Expenditures to date: \$252,525
Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 158
Parent/children pairs served to date: 66

6. University of North Texas, Kristin Farmer Autism Center

The project was an implementation of an evidence-based training program to increase the knowledge and skills of parents of children with ASD in a statewide school readiness collaboration. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted activities; however, adjustments were made as necessary and appropriate. The project included a partnership with the Texas Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) to expand and improve effective in-home training and support to families with a child with ASD.

The collaborative parent training program increased access to autism services for low-income families, including some in rural areas that are typically without autism services. On average, children made measurable improvements in their social engagement, expressive language, social imitation, and play. Project representatives created a manual and developed electronic learning modules, quizzes, and training materials for future use. These materials include formal teaching of learning strategies, instructions for how to conduct and use the Social Communication Checklist, information on goal setting, and how to conduct a formal home visit and all its components.

Total award: \$217,022

Expenditures to date: \$ 165,670.26

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 80

Parent/children pairs served to date: 84

7. The University of Texas at Austin, Center for Disability Studies

The project provided evidence-based parent training across five semesters to caregivers of children with ASD in evidence-based intervention for enhancing language skills in young children with ASD. Socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families were offered a cultural adaptation to meet their needs.

Over the course of the project, project representatives reported that parents and caregivers made tremendous progress in acquiring skills related to language facilitation and development, as well as social communication skills. Implementation of the techniques in an effective manner reflected their growing confidence and skills in implementing the techniques. Parents reported the project's impact as follows: "I also could see that my boys were more interested when I modeled how to respond/play with me," "The course was very complete and thorough. The clinicians who interacted with our son were incredible and very sensitive to him," "Massive improvement in his willingness to speak and interact, "Our clinicians were awesome and so helpful with our specific situation," and "After completing this program, I feel more confident in teaching new skills to my daughter!"

The project received multiple referrals through various agencies in Austin. In addition, families across Texas self-referred by contacting project representatives with training availability inquiries. The project reported overwhelmingly positive response from participating families.

Total award: \$299,903

Expenditures to date: \$253,387

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 510

Parent/children pairs served to date: 132

Fiscal Years 2020-2021

An RFA with funding available for all three categories of the grant program was published January 31, 2020 for FY 2020. Eight applications were received for Parent-directed Treatment, and seven were awarded. Eight applications were received for Teacher/Paraprofessional Training, and six were awarded. Six applications were received for Innovative Treatment models, and four were awarded. Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, 11 of the 17 awards were granted a no-cost extension of various lengths, according to their activities and unspent funds, to continue grant activities up to one year past the original grant end date of May 2022.

Parent-directed Treatment

In the Parent-directed Treatment category, the THECB funded the following seven applications:

1. Texas A&M University, Center on Disability and Development

The project involves online, self-paced instructional modules and coaching of parents to identify their and their children's needs and priorities related to communication deficits via a multimodal communication intervention. The proposed project builds upon a THECB-funded (2016-2020) Parent-directed Treatment project.

The project has been featured on two different local news channels. In 2021, project representatives were invited to introduce the project to Texas Statewide Leadership for Autism Training in August and Humble ISD in December. To address pandemic challenges, meetings were planned with public school districts with high proportions of at-risk students to provide multiple live workshops to train bilingual and diverse educators more intensively. To date, children with ASD in 47 counties have been served. The project received a no-cost extension until May 2023 to use funds that have experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$499,861

Expenditures to date: \$ 177,149

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 300

Parent/children pairs served to date: 218

2. Texas Tech University, Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research

The project provides a telehealth autism outreach clinic directed at parent/family-mediated interventions that expand on services available to rural and migrant families in the West Texas region, with a focus on providing families in underserved areas the same high-quality services available in urban or largely populated areas. Training and support for parents is offered locally as well as via a mobile clinic to reach a greater number of parents across regions of Texas.

Project progress has been very limited, given that school shutdowns and lack of ability to travel to share this information created a notable negative impact on the implementation of the project. Despite these unforeseen challenges, data show that the project has made a significant impact on the families who have been served to date. Graduate research assistants presented project findings at the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts Conference in March 2022.

Parents reported that they have seen progress in their child outside of sessions in other environments and continue to use the skills taught during the session with their child, adding that their learned skills were easy to teach their spouse to ensure they can both help their child develop. Parents have also reported that schoolteachers have also seen a change in their child with the other students.

The project received a no-cost extension until August 2022 to use funds that have experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$456,000

Expenditures to date: \$ 193,136

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 300

Parent/children pairs served to date: 22

3. Texas Woman's University, Speech and Language Clinic

The project applies imitation therapy in the home setting. Following training, parents serve as interventionists, and data is collected via a tool that automatically records and quantifies the interactions exchanged between adults and children. The major objective of the project is to determine the increase in the sound and imitation repertoire of the participating children.

Pandemic restrictions created unforeseen challenges regarding efforts to contact and screen potential participants for the study while practicing the appropriate state, federal, and CDC guidance safety guidelines. Additionally, many families were unable to participate due to the statewide winter storm in February 2021 and hospitalizations associated with COVID-19.

Project participants have indicated positive results, reporting that their children are enjoying the study sessions and have been producing more speech-related sounds, increasing word usage, and developing new vocabulary. Additionally, early childhood programs in several school districts have also indicated their interest to associate with the project. Project representatives are determining appropriate protocols to conduct the study safely with fidelity. The preliminary analysis of collected data has shown encouraging results, despite the current small data set.

The project received a no-cost extension until August 2022 to use funds that have experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$291,847

Expenditures to date: \$ 212,143

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 300

Parent/children pairs served to date: 36

4. The University of Texas at Austin, Speech and Hearing Center

The project provides evidence-based parent training to caregivers of children with ASD. For socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families, a cultural adaptation is used to meet their needs face to face, on demand, and via workshop opportunities.

Parents and caregivers display significant and consistent progress in their acquisition of skills taught in the project. They are showing increased confidence in engaging with their child and implementing the different language-facilitation strategies. Project representatives continue to observe increased instances of spontaneous initiations and requests from the children that demonstrate enhanced expressive and receptive language skills.

The project continues to anticipate exceeding projected numbers, in part due to the robust referral process by professionals and referrals from participating families.

Total award: \$399,044

Expenditures to date: \$315,047

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 480

Parent/children pairs served to date: 408

5. The University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley, Department of Human Development & School Services

The project aims to assist parents who have children or adolescents with ASD improve their psychological flexibility, confidence, and psychological well-being via opportunities to connect and support each other while learning evidence-based strategies.

Current data indicate that parents are not only developing knowledge about evidence-based strategies but also applying what they learn to help their children and, in turn, observing improved desirable child behaviors. Parents report application of project training when advocating for their child's inclusion through

public school participation provided under federal and state laws. The participants are gaining confidence in engaging in social interactions with their peers and parents, and repeatedly share appreciation for the program on social media. Overall, the evidence-based training program has reportedly assisted parents to improve general communication, prosocial behaviors, and social interactions among children with autism. Project participants are learning and applying evidence-based strategies to improve their children's well-being, social interactions, and academic achievement.

The network of parent groups continues to grow, with the Upper Valley also included to expand program impact. The project received a no-cost extension until August 2022 to use funds that have experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$499,265

Expenditures to date: \$271,080

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 398

Parent/children pairs served to date: 398

6. Baylor University, Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities

The goal of this project is to provide rural community parent training to parents of children with ASD via telehealth technology to increase children's access to evidence-based practices to decrease reliance on professionals and resources required for lifespan support. The project aims to lead to a generation of new knowledge with the dissemination of findings yielding improvements in the standard of care.

Despite a decrease in response to advertisement of the program relative to the response rate from previously funded parent-directed projects, as an indirect effect of the pandemic with significant upheaval of family routines, the children served are making improved strides in meeting their goals, and caregivers are reporting high satisfaction with the program.

Project participants rate the program favorably, suggesting it is feasible and socially valid. Participants implemented 97.7% of the steps of the evidence-based practices with fidelity (measured during 100% of sessions), indicating that the parent coaching was effective in training the parents to implement the intervention. Moreover, the children who completed the program to date made improvement on 63% their goals from baseline to intervention.

The project received a no-cost extension until May 2023 to use funds that have experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$369,699

Expenditures to date: \$94,322

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 180

Parent/children pairs served to date: 18

7. University of Houston-Clear Lake, Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities

The project is an expansion of an established funded program that provides communication and behavior management, assessment, and training to caregivers of individuals diagnosed with autism. Children who have language or social skills deficits and mild-to-moderate problem behavior are referred to the project. Services are available in person or via telehealth.

The pandemic continues to impact the ability to provide service directly. Families on the waitlist continue to opt for in-person services in lieu of telehealth services during the pandemic, citing internet fatigue per school

and work use, and a lack of interest in receiving telehealth services. If staff or clients are exposed to COVID-19, they are required to quarantine and obtain a negative COVID-19 test. When this occurs, telehealth services are offered to families. Given this fact, all staff are encouraged to obtain the COVID-19 vaccination and wear appropriate PPE during each face-to-face session to limit exposure. Despite the aforementioned project obstacles, in-person services returned in late spring 2021, and the project is expected to fulfill its goal of children served.

Parents reported the project's impact as follows: "I forgot the reason we came to (the program) was for tantrums. Since starting with you guys, we haven't seen any tantrums," and "Very nice people that explain child's behavior and how to prevent the bad behaviors. They are very thorough with all manner of examples to help with said behaviors. We were given a better view as to addressing problem behaviors. This program is invaluable..."

Total award: \$366,811

Expenditures to date: \$317, 252.90

Parent/children pairs projected to be served: 210

Parent/children pairs served to date: 107

Teacher/Paraprofessional Training

The THECB awarded six grants in the Board Certified Behavior Analyst Training for the Teachers/Paraprofessionals category:

1. Baylor University, Center for Developmental Disabilities

The goal of the project is to provide high-quality professional development to special education teachers with ongoing support to improve the quality of instruction provided to children with ASD, leading to better outcomes for children with autism in Texas. The project works collaboratively with regional ESCs to conduct the project.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the teacher training format to adapt to function entirely online, creating a one-month delay. The project is expected to fulfill its goal of parent/children served. The fact that teachers trained under the project are pursuing and receiving their Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) certification is cited as further evidence that the project will improve the quality of services delivered to children with autism in Texas.

Project representatives were granted a no-cost extension until May 2023 to train more teachers/serve more children with ASD across all three phases of the project, which would provide additional time to meet the project goals and expend all funds.

Total award: \$474,843

Expenditures to date: \$256,523

Children projected to be served: 850

Children served to date: 3,170

Teachers projected to be served: 240

Teachers served to date: 323

2. Texas A&M University, Center on Disability and Development

The project supports students with autism via a tiered training and coaching model on the foundations and applications of behavior analysis for paraprofessionals in public and charter schools with ongoing access to continuing education training videos.

A minimum of five additional school districts/ESCs in spring 2021 contacted program representatives to schedule training for spring/summer 2022. Participation in weekly follow-up support continues to be a challenge for program representatives. Scheduling workshops with potential school districts/ESCs has been a challenge, given that they report that three days of training is difficult to facilitate due to the statewide school district substitute teacher/paraprofessional shortage. Project representatives presented at the Texas Applied Behavior Analyst Conference in February 2021 and at the Division for Autism and Developmental Disabilities in January 2022.

Project representatives were granted a no-cost extension until May 2023 to train more teachers/serve more children with ASD and provide additional time to expend all funds.

Total award: \$471,662

Expenditures to date: \$ 203,987

Children projected to be served: 850

Children served to date: 2,899

Teachers projected to be served: 170

Teachers served to date: 587

3. Texas State University, Clinic for Autism Research, Evaluation, and Support

The project provides training on evidence-based practices for students with ASD to certified teachers and teaching assistants (paraprofessionals) that provide direct education and intervention services to students with autism in Texas public schools via one of two possible training paths.

The school's restrictions on in-person training, due to COVID-19, hindered recruitment, contributed to attrition, and complicated the project service delivery process. Despite hinderances caused by COVID-19, the project increased recruitment and recovered from delays during Year 2 of the project. It is anticipated that continued easing of COVID-related restrictions during Year 2 will result in the ongoing increase in training and children served.

Data indicates an average improvement in treatment fidelity of approximately 75% across all participants. Project representatives reported that 25 educators have successfully earned the RBT credential from the Behavior Analysis Certification Board.

Total award: \$286,701

Expenditures to date: \$195,013.46

Children projected to be served: 1,025

Children served to date: 1,044

Teachers projected to be served: 114

Teachers served to date: 86

4. Texas Tech University, Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research

The project is focused on providing training to educators by incorporating a coaching and feedback model with focus on generalization of skills in the classroom setting. The project goal is to provide assessment teams and educators the knowledge and resources necessary to provide a high-quality assessment in the school

setting, with additional resources to develop function-based interventions founded on evidence-based practices to address problem behavior in the classroom setting.

COVID-19 restrictions proved problematic regarding implementation of the project, with hiring delays, limited availability to create new or access existing work materials due to remote work/closure of campus, and challenges with extreme teacher online burnout. Additionally, the February 2021 statewide freeze interfered with participants having access to the internet and time to complete the project goals in a timely manner. Project representatives addressed these unforeseen challenges by speaking with special education directors or school district leaders to facilitate adequate turnout of participants in training.

Given the strain that the pandemic caused teachers and educational systems, modifications put into place following the creation of solutions by program representatives have resulted in stronger outcomes as the project proceeds.

Total award: \$460,000

Expenditures to date: \$272,813

Children projected to be served: 850

Children served to date: 1,412

Teachers projected to be served: 174

Teachers served to date: 223

5. The University of Texas at San Antonio, Educational Psychology

The widespread lack of access to applied behavior analytic-based education for children with ASD in San Antonio focuses this project to address this systemic problem by helping special education teachers become Board Certified Behavior Analysts. The project incorporates applied behavior analysis into teaching practices and classroom management to meet educational reform law targets more effectively, such as equity, reliance on evidence-based interventions and accountability, and demonstration of mastery of data-based decision making.

The most significant recent project challenge to date relates to omicron variant disruptions. Many project participants tested positive throughout the recent few months, and upon their return, most of their time was devoted to addressing their compounded workload and resuming bonding with their students. While this fact caused project participants difficulty in scheduling project meetings, it provided increased opportunities to receive supervision.

In March 2021, project representatives launched the Severe Behavior Outpatient Clinic to provide behavior assessment and intervention services to families of children with severe problem behavior. Participants receive a four-hour appointment that includes indirect and direct observations, experimental analysis, function-based intervention, and caregiver training. They are then referred to further services based on the individual needs of the participant and provided telehealth follow-up options.

In May 2021, outpatient services provided three-hour events via two evenings, where children were paired with a therapist to work on social-communication, adaptive, and leisure skills using behavior analysis. In June of 2021, project representatives launched intensive summer programming for children with autism to spend a week with project teachers, supervisors, and volunteers to teach communication, social, and adaptive skills in the context of enjoyable camp activities. The project served 168 families throughout the eight-week summer program.

The project received a no-cost extension until November 2022 to use funds that have experienced expending delays in part due to COVID-19.

Total award: \$474,921
Expenditures to date: \$248,839
Children projected to be served: 850
Children served to date: 855
Teachers projected to be served: 12
Teachers served to date: 16

6. University of Houston-Clear Lake, Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities

The project targets public school teachers and paraprofessionals who instruct students with a primary diagnosis of autism in the Houston metropolitan area to receive training and classroom consultation services on effective practices, with particular focus on understanding and managing problem behavior.

Due to the pandemic, the project was completely modified to provide it via a virtual platform (e.g., Zoom™) and to accommodate complicated teacher schedules. Although trainers were unable to visit teachers in their classrooms, follow-up emails were continually sent to all teachers and paraprofessionals as they progressed through the training, and they were provided with additional in-vivo support via virtual meetings. In recent months of the project, a select number of school districts have permitted visitors and outside agencies to work face-to-face with teachers and paraprofessionals, allowing project representatives to schedule visits with teachers who are in various stages of the training. Additionally, representatives reported a new partnership with YES Prep open-enrollment public charter school system and began training with teachers from the district in February 2022.

Satisfaction surveys indicate participants are highly satisfied with the trainings and overall program, demonstrating what they learned with high integrity, increasing the likelihood of them correctly implementing these procedures and effectively managing problem behavior in their classrooms.

Total award: \$466,593
Expenditures to date: \$385,456.43
Children projected to be served: 850
Children served to date: 568
Teachers projected to be served: 288
Teachers served to date: 181

Innovative Treatment Models

The THECB awarded four grants in the Research, Development, and Evaluation of Innovative Autism Treatment Models category:

1. Baylor College of Medicine with Texas Children's Hospital Neurological Research Institute

The goal of the project is to develop and evaluate a parent-led, internet-delivered CBT (iCBT) treatment model consisting of an interactive website with treatment materials that parents can work through with their child, provided in English and Spanish. The project will evaluate the clinical and cost-effectiveness of different models of brief therapist support to enhance iCBT use and outcomes and inform sustainability. Given the impacts of COVID-19 on face-to-face research and services, project representatives aim to provide this timely resource for the ASD community.

Project leaders developed intervention materials and recruitment for stakeholders for the stakeholder-engaged research and have reached out to many providers of autism research in Texas to develop statewide referral networks. The project has received inquiries from school support personnel and families, indicating

strong interest for when full enrollment can begin for participants. Additionally, clinicians have informed project representatives that they plan on referring youth to the program.

Given that the project experienced significant launch delays that included slower than anticipated IRB approval, changes to research procedures due to COVID-19, and subsequent administrative delays (including replacing the program director), an altered timeline resulted for the study. Project representatives were granted a no-cost extension until May 2023 to fulfill original goals for children with ASD served and expend all funds.

Total award: \$690,963

Expenditures to date: \$ 379,835

Children projected to be served: 140

Children served to date: 0

2. Baylor University, Baylor Speech, Language, and Hearing Clinic

The project investigates and quantifies effects of multitasking organic motion stimulus as an intervention to benefit children with autism. The intervention involves stimulating the body with organic motion through riding on a mechanical horse-riding simulator, while simultaneously engaging the rider with motor and cognitive activities. The project will determine the extent to which the intervention affects various autism symptoms including core behavior, balance, motor coordination, and speech and language. The project aims to reveal neural changes associated with the intervention and the extent to which these changes may provide predictive biomarkers of therapeutic response.

The primary challenge of participant recruitment was addressed by adapting to a compressed protocol schedule and seeking to complete each participant in 15 weeks rather than the previous plan of two 12-week periods. The project has maintained session count via two sessions per week per participant, rather than one per week. Recruitment efforts, recruitment flyer upgrades, and continuous, active communication with the community and with clinic recruitment partners were also completed. Given the shorter overall commitment, increased dosage frequency can be accomplished. The completion of new participants through the first half of the project has been reported as a major accomplishment given that it provides the first sets of pre- and post-assessments data.

Although the number of completed participants is too low for publication of data analysis at this time, project representatives have presented study methods and preliminary results at three conferences (including the National Association of School Psychologists) and have submitted an abstract for a fourth in May 2022 at the International Society for Autism Research.

Project representatives were granted a no-cost extension until May 2023 to fulfill original goals for children with ASD served and expend all funds.

Total award: \$599,209

Expenditures to date: \$431,078

Children projected to be served: 30

Children served to date: 15

3. Texas Woman's University, School of Occupational Therapy

This project creates established high school-level autism rating teams and protocols to evaluate the autism friendliness of community venues and events. The goal of this research is to create an innovative, sustainable approach to promoting community participation for students, schools, and venues impacted by autism spectrum disorders via the development of the Community Participation curriculum, teaching activities, and tools.

Project representatives began working with community partners, namely collaboration with [nonPareil Institute](#), to perform environmental audits alongside individuals with ASD at various venues, including Target, Hobby Lobby, Haggard Public Library, a fast-food drive-thru, and a to-be-determined entertainment venue. This project outcome increases the confidence of individuals with ASD to self-advocate for autism-friendly environments. The creation of a digital platform for community partners that promotes awareness of sensory challenges that individuals with ASD might face is in progress. The digital platform will educate community partners on how the environmental factors of their facilities (e.g., lighting, noise level) might impact individuals with ASD.

Project representatives created Sensory Space on Wheels (SSW), a portable sensory space that promotes self-regulation when the surrounding environment becomes overwhelming. SSW is an ice-fishing tent equipped with objects that provide visual, auditory, tactical, proprioceptive, and vestibular input: rocking chairs (back-and-forth movement), weighted lap pads (deep pressure touch), weighted blankets (body warmth), and sensory lighting (soothing and calming effect).

SSW was deployed at the Dallas Zoo during their Homeschool Day Event for approximately 3,200 students in early March 2022 with the assistance of 15 occupational therapy (OT) students from Texas Woman's University (TWU); approximately 350 children with ASD were in attendance. The SSW was deployed at Nasher Sculpture Center with the assistance of six to eight OT students from TWU in April 2022, with approximately 100 children with ASD anticipated to attend. The April 2022 Dallas Museum of Art Family Festival's first day-long event since the pandemic began deployed the SSW as well.

Based on the SSW work developed in this project, representatives were asked to partner with Dallas' Frontiers of Flight Museum's grant to use the SSW in their space. The grant was ultimately selected for funding by [NASA's Universe of Learning](#), a worldwide collaboration of museums and cultural institutions affiliated with the Association of Science and Technology Centers and the Smithsonian Institution to develop and test sustainable models of innovative science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning for informal learning institutions. There are over 40 informal learning institutions from across the nation (this will be the second in Texas, joining the International Museum of Art & Science in McAllen) that have developed and tested program models for their audiences, using NASA Astrophysics resources in their efforts to make STEM learning more accessible and engaging.

Total award: \$267,477

Expenditures to date: \$109,506

Children projected to be served: 250

Children served to date: 323

4. The University of Texas at Dallas, Callier Autism Treatment Research Center

The project is an autism-specific, parent-mediated naturalistic developmental behavioral intervention that blends developmental and applied behavioral analysis techniques. It differs from other interventions in its innovative protocol to facilitate mutual gaze by coaching parents to use implicit teaching with contingent natural reinforcement during motivating face-to-face routines. The aim is that the focus on mutual gaze may adjust brain activity toward a more typical trajectory. The project continues to serve culturally and economically diverse children with severe ASD and intellectual impairment.

The project is currently serving fewer families than originally projected due to COVID-19 barriers, including the modification to telehealth that impacted family readiness for intervention. The project has experienced a considerable amount of turnover which has negatively impacted the timeline, namely early childhood intervention providers. Community outreach to increase awareness of the project and referrals continue to improve participation.

Project leaders provided an in-service in Spanish to approximately 50 parents and educators in a Dallas ISD meeting. Project status was presented in a webinar as part of The University of Texas System Early Childhood

Scholars Series. Approximately 125 people attended the lecture live and, to date, 56 people have viewed [the webinar](#) on YouTube.

Publications and presentations have been achieved and/or are planned for submission to the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, the *Journal of Communicative Disorders*, and the Annual American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention.

Project representatives were granted a no-cost extension until November 2022 to fulfill original goals for children with ASD served and expend all funds.

Total award: \$863,926

Expenditures to date: \$639,462

Children projected to be served: 200

Children served to date: 84

Fiscal Years 2022-2023 awards will be announced in spring 2022. The THECB maintains information about the AGP online at www.highered.texas.gov/aggp.

Appendix A: Annual Reporting Requirement

General Appropriations Act for the 2022-23 Biennium, 87th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, 2021. Article IX – General Provisions, Health-Related Provisions.

Section 10.05. Funding for Autism Services. (IX-57). Appropriated elsewhere in this Act for autism services is \$21,702,870 in General Revenue Funds for the 2022-23 biennium, which is allocated to the following agencies for the following purposes:

(a) Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC): General Revenue Funds totaling \$14,292,870 for the biennium for focused Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) treatment services.

(b) Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB): General Revenue Funds totaling \$7,410,000 for the 2022-23 biennium to distribute to autism research centers at institutions of higher education that currently provide evidence-based behavioral services and training, in the amounts and for the purposes as follows:

(1) Parent-directed Treatment: \$2,055,000 per fiscal year to serve 750 children per year;

(2) Board-certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) Training for Teachers/Paraprofessionals: \$950,000 per fiscal year to serve 2,547 children per year. The research centers may contract with educational service centers to provide this training;

(3) Research, development and evaluation of innovative autism treatment models: \$700,000 per fiscal year;

(4) Administrative support of the programs in subsections (b)(1) through (b)(3): \$150,000 per fiscal year may be expended by the Higher Education Coordinating Board;

(5) If funds appropriated under Subsections (b)(1), (2), or (3) exceed the funds that can be expended in accordance with the requirements of that subsection, the Higher Education Coordinating Board may expend the excess funds on any purpose described in Subsections (b)(1), (2) or (3); and

(6) Any unexpended balances on hand at the end of fiscal year 2022 are appropriated for the same purpose for fiscal year 2023.

(c) THECB shall gather data on the above programs from each institution's autism research center and submit an annual report on the effectiveness of each program, including the number of children served, the number of parents and/or teachers/paraprofessionals trained, and the results of the research on innovative treatment models. The report shall be submitted no later than September 1 of each year to the Legislative Budget Board, Office of the Governor, the Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee, Speaker of the House, and Lieutenant Governor.

Texas Higher Education

COORDINATING BOARD

This document is available on the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board website:
<http://highered.texas.gov>.

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