

POLICY AND PROGRAM STUDIES SERVICE REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Early Outcomes of the GEAR UP Program: Final Report

In 1998, Congress authorized the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) program. The purpose of the program is to foster increased knowledge, expectations, and preparation for postsecondary education among low-income students and their families. GEAR UP projects may provide services to students, parents and teachers at high-poverty schools with at least 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Services may include: tutoring, mentoring, college field trips, career awareness, college-readiness counseling, classes, meetings, parent education about access to higher education, curriculum reform, and teacher training. GEAR UP is based on a model of providing services to an entire grade cohort, and grantees are required to offer services to all students in the target grade or grades according to their needs, but individual participation is voluntary. GEAR UP services must begin no later than the seventh grade. The GEAR UP model also stresses partnerships of schools, districts, community organizations and postsecondary institutions. The first grants were awarded in August of 1999. Most of the first GEAR UP grantees began by serving sixth- or seventh-graders in fall of 1999, with the intention of providing continuing services to this cohort of students as they progressed through high school.

Evaluation Design

There were two major goals of the evaluation. The first was to provide descriptive information on the early implementation of the program and the second was to observe the association between GEAR UP participation, and student and parent outcomes. To provide the descriptive information the study conducted site visits to a sample of 20 of the initial partnership projects. From these partnerships, a sample of 18 middle schools and 18 matched comparisons schools was selected and up to 140 seventh-grade students were randomly selected from each school. Student and parent surveys were administered about midway through the seventh grade and near the end of the eighth grade. Student school records and GEAR UP participation records were also obtained.

This report focuses on middle school outcomes. The outcomes associated with high school achievement and preparation for and enrollment in college will be examined in subsequent data collections and reports.¹

¹ In September 2004, the U.S. Department of Education issued a contract to determine high school outcomes such as academic preparation for postsecondary education and postsecondary enrollment.

Data Limitations

A number of factors limited the strength of conclusions: First of all the study was not a randomized experiment and the school matching was limited. The set of cooperating grantees and schools is a small purposive sample, leading both to concerns about generalizability and power to detect small effects—particularly schoolwide effects such as curriculum changes and the resulting shift in course-taking patterns. The comparison schools could not be matched on historical college attendance rates, as would have ideally been desired. It should also be noted that because service provision started prior to baseline data collection, it was not possible to remove all seventh-grade differences between the two sets of students without simultaneously removing some of the effects of early information services. As a result of these caveats, the findings in this report are more suggestive than definitive.

Key Findings

- Attending a GEAR UP school as measured near the end of eighth grade was positively associated² with parents' knowledge of opportunities and benefits of postsecondary education for their children.
- Attending a GEAR UP school as measured near the end of eighth grade was positively associated with students' knowledge concerning postsecondary education opportunities available to them.
- Attending a GEAR UP school as measured near the end of eighth grade was positively associated with parents' involvement in the school and their children's education.
- Attending a GEAR UP school as measured near the end of eighth grade was positively associated with parents' having higher academic expectations for their children. However, there was no evidence of an association between attending a GEAR UP school and the strength of student intentions to attend college, expectations for postsecondary education or overall orientation toward college.
- There was no evidence of an association between attending a GEAR UP school and grades or school behavior, such as attendance or disciplinary problems.
- Attending a GEAR UP school as measured near the end of eighth grade was a positively associated with taking above-grade-level science courses in middle school.

² Throughout the report, an "association" is discussed only if the supporting hypothesis test was significant at the 5 percent level, meaning there would have been only a 5 percent chance of finding the difference by chance. There are some associations discussed in the body of the report when the significance level of the test was at the 10 percent level. These are qualified by the phrase "modest evidence." If no evidence was found even at the 10 percent level, the phrase "no evidence" is used.

- For African-American students attendance at a GEAR UP school as measured near the end of eighth grade was positively associated with the number of rigorous (or above grade level)³ courses taken during middle school. African-American students from GEAR UP schools averaged 1.0 rigorous course as compared 0.5 of a course among African-American students from non-GEAR UP schools.

The site visits to the sampled GEAR UP middle schools revealed the following:

- GEAR UP middle school staff, participating in the study focus groups, reported that GEAR UP middle schools were more likely than non-GEAR UP middle schools to offer honors and above-grade-level classes. They perceived that some of these changes took place with the implementation of the GEAR UP projects in 1999.
- Most of the teachers who participated in focus groups expressed positive opinions about GEAR UP-sponsored professional development, although there was some variation in how useful or relevant teachers felt individual sessions were for them or to GEAR UP's purpose.

Finally, the study examined GEAR UP on two important issues: transitioning the program to high school and sustainability beyond the federal grant.

- Projects reported some difficulty transitioning into high schools; such as inadequate staffing and administrative barriers, which were similar to those, reported two years earlier when the grants were just starting out in middle schools. Projects reporting the smoothest transitions tended to provide services to high school students that were similar to those provided to middle school students.
- Early evidence suggests that some aspects of GEAR UP will be sustained in middle schools beyond the period of federal funding. About half of the projects studied were optimistic about continuing, and one-third had made specific plans to do so as they neared the third year of their grants.

³ Academic rigor is determined by the number of core academic courses taken that are considered to be above grade level for an average eighth-grade student.