



# Six Years of Philadelphia GEAR UP

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## An Evaluation Report EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Prepared by  
Research for Action

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## Introduction

Research for Action (RFA) has been the evaluator of the Philadelphia GEAR UP program since its inception in 1999. GEAR-UP is a federally-funded grant program initiated through legislation by one of Philadelphia's own congressman, Chaka Fattah. GEAR UP aims to increase low-income students' access to post-secondary education. In 1999 the School District of Philadelphia was awarded \$28 million over five years to implement the program; the grant was later extended for a sixth and final year. The program was a "partnership" in which the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), together with the Philadelphia Education Fund, Philadelphia Futures, and Temple University, would work together to implement the program. The initiative had the goal of building the district's capacity to adopt and sustain successful GEAR UP programs at the conclusion of the grant.

Schools served by GEAR UP include eight neighborhood comprehensive high schools and their twenty feeder middle schools.<sup>1</sup> GEAR UP serves cohorts of students designated by grade level, with a new cohort added each year. The first cohort of students, which began 7th grade in the first year of GEAR UP, graduated from high school in 2005. In 2004-2005, GEAR UP served 18,440 students in grades seven through twelve. Twenty-four school-based staff served as direct service coordinators.

GEAR UP had three explicit primary goals: Enhancing Academic Support, Enhancing College Awareness, and Enhancing Family and Community Involvement. This executive summary gives an overview of major challenges, key outcomes for each goal, and recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup>During the last two years of the grant, three GEAR UP middle schools began a transition process to become small high schools.

## **GEAR UP Context and Challenges**

Program designers for college access programs such as GEAR UP are often faced with a difficult choice between serving a small number of students deeply with extensive supports and serving many or all more superficially. This was true in Philadelphia. GEAR UP's goal was to prepare all students at GEAR UP schools for college and to provide the necessary supports for them to get there. Schools were selected for participation in GEAR UP because they were located in federally designated Empowerment Zones with higher poverty rates than the city as a whole and with lower levels of academic performance than in Philadelphia's other public neighborhood high schools. While the amount of GEAR UP funding sounds vast (over \$7 million in 2004-2005 alone), it amounted to only \$425 per student. The per pupil amount was \$809 in year one of the program but funding did not keep up with the increase in the number of students served, hence the drop in per pupil allotment.

While there have been annual reports each of the past six years, this report and executive summary look at the entire six years of the GEAR UP project in Philadelphia. Over the course of the initiative, GEAR UP's major challenges included:

- Turmoil/turnover at the district and program levels.
- Centralized and bureaucratic contracting and payment processes.
- Weakened partnerships with lead partners and with community-based organizations (CBOs) and institutions of higher education (IHEs).
- Growing number of cohorts that meant an annual decrease in per pupil funding.

- Inadequate school infrastructure and leadership changes in schools.
- Difficult collaborations between guidance counselors and GEAR UP staff.
- High stakes testing environment.
- Lack of effective SDP structures for tracking college application and enrollment as well as post-secondary activity, which would have helped those directing this and future programs.

### Key Outcomes

The following section examines each of GEAR UP's three major goal areas. It assesses the key outcomes for each goal area, as well as which of GEAR UP's key programs have been institutionalized by the school district.

#### *Enhancing Academic Support*

The goal of enhancing academic preparation was only minimally met both in terms of having a measurable impact on large numbers of GEAR UP students and in terms of implementing programs that affect more than sub-groups of GEAR UP students. This goal was a challenge throughout the initiative, in part because many of the factors affecting students' academic preparation were outside of GEAR UP's purview.

- The GEAR UP academic support programming that has been adopted by the district and will be sustained beyond the GEAR UP grant includes robotics programs and a support and mentoring program for all new teachers.
- GEAR UP generated some very strong programs to enhance students' academic preparation, especially

those sponsored by Institutions of Higher Education. These programs were not scaled up to serve entire cohorts, or even large groups of students, however.

- Data on student outcomes are mixed but indicate that many GEAR UP students will not be academically well-prepared for college. Data indicate negligible impact on student attendance and that overall student standardized test scores remained very low, with just 28% and 13%, of the GEAR UP research cohort scoring at basic or above in the 11th grade PSSA reading and math tests, respectively. In contrast, by the end of 11th grade, the research cohort was more on target in terms of maintaining appropriate grade level than a comparison group. By the end of 11th grade, 75% of the research cohort had completed geometry and Algebra II, important milestones in a college preparatory course sequence. On the other hand, in interviews and surveys, many students and teachers said that many GEAR UP students likely would not be prepared for the academic rigors of college.
- GEAR UP schools continued to be characterized by high drop out rates common to urban schools. By June 2004, the end of the first cohort's 11th grade year, more than 30% of the research cohort was no longer enrolled in the district.

### *Enhancing College Awareness*

College awareness was the strongest and most visible area of implementation throughout the years of GEAR UP. It also has the strongest record of institutionalization, i.e., multiple programs and initiatives in this area have been integrated into the district's structures and budget.

- The district institutionalized a number of GEAR UP college awareness efforts, including college visits for

7th and 10th graders, student success centers to coordinate college programming in high schools, administration of PSAT tests to all students, and the establishment of the Office of College and Career Awareness to coordinate all college awareness and support programs.

- GEAR UP has dramatically increased the numbers of students in GEAR UP schools who are visiting colleges, receiving information about college-going, and taking concrete steps towards college, particularly taking PSAT and SAT exams. While GEAR UP has had a strong impact in this area, it has not achieved some of the very ambitious numerical goals originally set, e.g. that all students would visit a college or that all would apply to a college.
- Students' college aspirations, measured through surveys, interviews and anecdotal data, have consistently been very high throughout the GEAR UP initiative.
- Spring 2005 student survey data indicated that 71% of 12th grade respondents had applied to at least one post-secondary institution and that, by late spring, 49% of students surveyed had received at least one acceptance. It appears likely that percentages of GEAR UP students applying to and enrolling in college have increased over pre-GEAR UP numbers, but there are gaps in district data collection in this area. A more reliable quantitative assessment of these outcomes will be available later in 2006 from the National Student Clearinghouse.

#### *Enhancing Family and Community Involvement*

Parent and community involvement has consistently been the most challenging GEAR UP goal, with the weakest implementation and poorest success. In the face of ambitious goals and ever increasing numbers of students to serve, GEAR UP's efforts focused mainly on work inside schools.

- Community involvement largely consisted of contracts with CBOs to provide services both in and out of school. All regions developed such program partnerships with CBOs; the GEAR UP program struggled at times with how to monitor and assess these services.
- GEAR UP did provide helpful support and information to some parents, but parent programming was not extensive. The most consistent form of parent involvement took the form of invitations for parents to attend a program orientation or a culminating event.

### **Recommendations**

As outlined in this summary and in more detail in our full report, GEAR UP in Philadelphia faced many challenges during its six years. Many of these lay outside of the program's purview or were inherited obstacles that made implementation and success more difficult. GEAR UP has assisted students in learning about college, applying to college, visiting colleges and negotiating college acceptances, and related decision-making. We also know that GEAR UP students continue to drop out of school at nearly the same rate as their peers in other schools, that their academic performance remains low, and that their parents are only peripherally involved with GEAR UP. Because the majority of students' academic experience (key to preparing for college) takes place outside of GEAR UP, the program needs to target its work in order to build on and complement the school district's academic programming. Below are some recommendations which we think may help those directing these programs in their efforts to help Philadelphia's youth.

- Increase emphasis on strengthening students' academic skills; GEAR UP could both align its efforts to build

on district academic programming and advocate for change where it is needed.

- Integrate academics and college awareness efforts as much as possible so that programming can address both goals.
- Develop better student tracking systems so that (a) student participation in GEAR UP and similar programs can be better assessed and (b) the district and schools can get a more accurate picture of students' application to, acceptances from, and enrollment in college over time.
- Reconsider the district's role as fiscal agent. Consider using a third party as fiscal agent for the grant, as do many other GEAR UP partnership grants.
- Either make parent involvement more central in terms of programming or focus parent involvement in very specific areas (e.g., certain kinds of workshops or information, connecting with parents of children in specific grades).
- Provide additional information about finances, including workshops that educate students' families in order to dispel myths about finances and encourage active family support to help students solve the financial challenges ahead.
- Provide clear delineation of roles and responsibilities of guidance counselors and GEAR UP coordinators.