

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Austin

2019 Spring Staff Focus Group Results Summary

Introduction

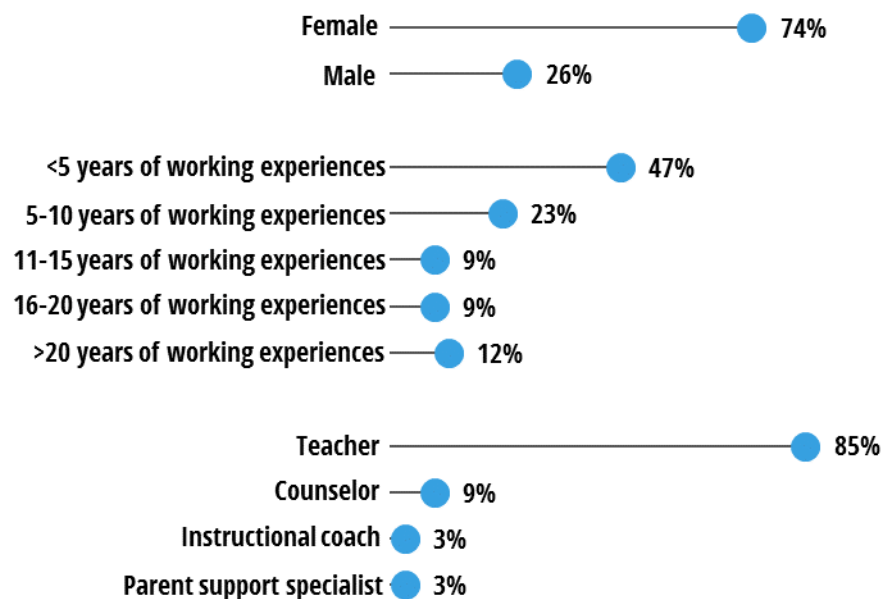
The AISD (Austin Independent School District) evaluation team conducted focus groups with staff at GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) middle schools in the spring of 2019. Participants in focus groups were 7th-grade staff (e.g., teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, and parent support specialist) at five GEAR UP middle schools: Dobie, Fulmore, Mendez, Paredes, and Webb. In total, 35 staff participated in the focus groups. On average, seven staff participated in each focus group.

The purpose of the staff focus groups was to gather information about their perspectives on the GEAR UP program, their experiences with the GEAR UP program, and their support for student college preparation. Participants were asked to provide feedback in the following areas: (a) understanding of the GEAR UP program, (b) roles of the GEAR UP facilitators, (c) GEAR UP activities, (d) professional development activities, (e) teacher expectations, and (f) teacher preparation for students' future education.

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Figure 1.

The majority of focus group participants were female teachers, and most had fewer than 10 years of working experiences.



Source. 2018–2019 AISD staff records

Summary of Findings



Staff had a clear understanding of the program's purpose. Staff who participated in the focus groups across five campuses consistently recognized the role of the GEAR UP program in preparing students for college and career. Participants emphasized that the program opened up college and career options for students. They identified various supports the program provided for students, including academic support, emotional support, and field trips. Excerpts of staff's comments about the GEAR UP program included:

I know the GEAR UP program is the federally funded grant that tracks students through college and their postsecondary success.

What I have learned is not just to prepare them but also open different doors for them to get financial aid to go to college.

One of the things that I think the GEAR UP program has done for our kids is allowing them to believe in themselves again, because a lot of them had lost a lot of hope.

They give them all these different supports and show them different things they can work toward. A whole lot of different options to colleges and career options.



Staff reported GEAR UP facilitators were supportive of both teachers and students. Most of the staff reported that GEAR UP facilitators supported students in college preparation in various ways, including tutoring, counseling, lunch bunch,¹ and college visits. Staff indicated that the facilitators were helpful in facilitating their teaching by co-teaching or implementing college readiness activities during class time. Consistent with students' comments about the GEAR UP facilitators, staff stated that facilitators provided emotional support to students and helped students through hard times (Wang & Orr, 2019). Staff described how students relied on

¹ *Lunch brunch* refers to a GEAR UP workshop during lunch, which may include tutoring, career speakers, or other college readiness activities.

facilitators when they had a rough day and needed someone to talk to. Examples of participants' comments about the GEAR UP facilitators included:

I was interested in making lessons related to careers, and the facilitator co-teaches with me sometimes on career exploration.

The facilitator is keeping students focused on academic success. Students lean on the facilitator for support. The facilitator has created a great environment and a safe space for our students.

I know that some of the kids are higher learning but kind of struggling with behavior. The facilitator really intercedes with that a lot.

The facilitator is bilingual, and that has also been a huge strength. The facilitator comes to all of our special education meetings, and 9 out of 10 has to be translated, and the facilitator has facilitated it to no end.



School staff supported students' college preparation. Staff indicated they helped students' college preparation in various ways, including having consistent conversations about college preparation with students, providing academic support, and encouraging students to have ownership of their study. More specifically, staff reported they always talked with students about college. They emphasized to students the importance of the knowledge and skills they needed to gain for their future education and career. Staff helped students learn study skills (e.g., note-taking, time management, organization, and task priorities) using Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) strategies and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills. They instilled a sense of accountability in students by teaching them to be responsible for their own studies. Staff indicated they encouraged their students to be self-advocates and to be comfortable asking questions. They felt building confidence in students was critical in motivating them to succeed in their future education. Staff also described their encouragement for students, telling students about their own college education experiences and building a college corner that displayed teachers' college education experiences in their classroom.

Examples of staff's comments about their support for students' college preparation included:

I talk about college all the time. I talked to my students about my college occasionally, my experiences there. I tell them when I can't provide them a handout of notes, "Sorry, you have to write, like we do in college, learn how to abbreviate, here is how you abbreviate."

Making sure they advocate for themselves, which is another thing GEAR UP is good at helping them do, like just asking for help and being comfortable asking the teachers questions.

Try to guide them to take accountability for their own actions and be responsible, because you are on your own in college.

Why I am teaching is to build confidence in kids. They build their confidence that they can be successful in whatever they choose. I keep the rigor really high in my classroom. I have high expectations.

Staff expected students to go to college. All staff indicated they expected their students to go to college. Staff expressed that they expected their students to go to a variety of colleges (e.g., 4-year college, 2-year college, technical college). Staff exposed their students to different options of schooling after high school to address students' diverse learning needs and interests. Staff also indicated the importance of parents' expectations and family support for students' future education. Examples of staff's comments about their expectations included:

One of my kids is pretty smart. He has a lot of potential, and his brother is going to one day own his plumbing company. So he just plans to work with his brother. I was like, "That's awesome. You can go to technical college."

I expect them to get higher learning, the high school, 4-year college, trade school, or junior college.



Austin Partners in Education (APIE) tutoring contributed to academic progress. Staff consistently reported APIE tutoring was a helpful activity that contributed to academic progress. Teachers enjoyed working with APIE tutors in their classroom, reporting they were valuable to both teachers and students. Staff indicated the helpful nature of the APIE tutoring conducted one-on-one, in small groups, and in whole-class settings. Staff applauded APIE tutors in their classroom who were active in initiating activities, running lessons, and providing help to special education students. Staff emphasized that tutoring provided an additional avenue in which to engage students in learning and to motivate students to overcome challenges. Some staff stressed tutoring as the most helpful GEAR UP activity in preparing students for college. Staff's comments about academic support the program provided for students included:

I noticed the confidence level of those students being boosted. They are more willing to try and not succeed but learn how to fix it and try again than they were at the beginning of the year.

Tutors are really essential. And just by being there, they are modeling what the college education does. They are able to speak to it. I think tutors are really effective.

I have been able to see how the tutors interact with the students, and I have even learned something the way they make it so easy and fun.

They'll do whatever we ask. Sometimes they even run lessons. I think they are a really valuable asset in my classroom.

She has been a tremendous asset to the class, to the students, and to me. She has played many roles in the classroom.

Austin Partners in Education (APIE)

APIE is an independent, nonprofit organization created through a partnership between the AISD and the Austin Chamber of Commerce. By leveraging community resources, APIE helps the Austin community and classrooms work together to ensure academic excellence and personal success for students in AISD. APIE typically provides programs to students in Title I schools within AISD, where many of the students who receive services are economically disadvantaged (Looby, Pazera, Stelling, & Wiggins, 2014).

GEAR UP partnered with APIE to provide tutoring to its students in all 11 GEAR UP middle schools. APIE tutors brought diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. They provided whole-group or small-group tutoring support as well as push-in or pull-out tutoring.

APIE tutors were supervised by APIE staff, who meet regularly with the GEAR UP project director to review implementation activities and to identify needs for improvement.





College visits were helpful in multiple ways. When asked to comment on the most helpful GEAR UP activity that prepares students for college, many staff indicated college visits were the most helpful. They emphasized that college visits exposed students to a learning environment where they can understand what they need to do for college preparation and what they will need to do in college.

Also, many staff described college visits as academic support, in addition to college awareness and readiness support. College visits might serve to inspire students to improve their academic achievement. Although staff indicated college visits contributed to academic progress, their comments did not reflect a direct connection. For example, staff's thoughts about college visits as academic support included: (a) students' exposure to colleges motivated them to think about college and (b) the experiences at college campuses expanded students' views of higher education and helped them develop a greater understanding of college options that fit their academic needs and interests.

In terms of the role of college visits played in supporting college awareness and readiness, many staff indicated college visits were positive experiences for students to develop a better sense of what college life is like. Staff described college visits as awakening experiences for students. They shared some scenarios in which students were excited about the colleges they visited, were wearing college gear, and were considering college options. Excerpts of staff's comments about college visits included:

They are excited to go on field trips. They are like, "Oh, we are going to see the college." I hear they talk about Baylor. Yesterday when they got back, they all got excited. I think that's academic support because it is motivating them.

I think taking the field trips to universities, because they got to go to Houston, and I think that has been very beneficial for our students. Because they can expand their world and see what is out there. That part has helped them.

I think that was awakening for them. Seeing the kids walk to classes on their own. We walked through the library at St. Edwards. They were just struck that people were actually there studying and working.

He was smiling. He has a little bag and stuff. I just saw him walking into the school and wearing that bag. And I was like, "Did you like it?" And he was like, "Yeah, I like that school."

The kids who come back are just ready to learn and soak up as much as they can and get what they need in order to be more prepared. So this is what it looks like to have an entire campus full of people who are here to get the stuff done.

Getting them out of the neighborhood. And I love that you all have an emphasis on Texas universities not Austin universities. You want to go to UT, consider UTSA too. I think it's awesome.



In addition to tutoring and college visits, staff thought other GEAR UP activities were helpful.

In addition to tutoring and college visits, focus group participants listed a variety of other GEAR UP activities they thought helpful in preparing students for college, including job site visits, career exploration activities, Breakthrough,² Naviance, AVID strategies, and financial planning. Staff recognized that these activities equipped students with knowledge and skills to be prepared in college, helped students understand college and career requirements, and provided students with a money sense. Some staff expressed that 7th-grade students might not know a lot about college requirements and costs at this point but merely know that grades are connected to college. Therefore, staff thought GEAR UP helped students develop knowledge about college requirements and costs early in the preparation process.

Staff also reported college banners in the hallway and classroom door decorations with college as helpful GEAR UP activities to support college awareness. Staff described classroom door decoration with information about colleges that students visited, and college banners in the hallway that expanded students' knowledge about colleges across the nation. Examples of staff's comments about the GEAR UP activities included:

Because I want to relate what professions they can do in Texas, so I have been co-teaching with the GEAR UP facilitator. We start with interests—"Oh, these are options you can research on"—and present the possible careers they want to do.

Another thing the GEAR UP facilitator has done with the kids, which is great, is that she gives them a realistic perspective on what things cost, what salary is enough for you, and how you want to live. It is good to give a money sense.

² Breakthrough provides a 6-week program for entering Breakthrough students to learn about college and career. The program also provides academic interventions to ensure students are successful in 8th grade and beyond. Learn more about Breakthrough at <http://breakthroughctx.org/>

Naviance and AVID

Naviance is a college planning and career readiness assessment software that helps students align their strengths and interests to postsecondary goals. Learn more about Naviance at <https://www.naviance.com/>

GEAR UP used Naviance to have students complete college searches and begin building a college portfolio. With GEAR UP support, the district developed a college and career readiness scope and sequence. Including Naviance tasks for every grade, starting in 6th grade, will help sustain GEAR UP programming.

AVID aims to close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society. The AVID elective class targets students in the academic middle who have the desire to go to college and can complete rigorous curriculum, using the will to work hard. Learn more about AVID at <https://www.avid.org/what-avid-is>

GEAR UP partnered with AVID to enhance instructional practices, student engagement, and college-going culture on AVID/GEAR UP campuses. Teachers at GEAR UP campuses participating in AVID received additional professional learning opportunities.

Through AVID, they learn all about note-taking, organization, strategies that would help them succeed as far as high school and beyond.

The banners in the hallway. A lot of them did not know there were that many colleges. They thought we probably have four in Texas, and that's it. And they were like, "I didn't even know that existed." So it opened their eyes to a lot more possibilities.

Staff also recommended a variety of activities they thought would be helpful in preparing students for college. These recommended activities included:

- Checklist of tasks students need to do for future education
- College application process
- Financial aid information
- Students' true passion exploration
- Visits from professionals/college students
- Experience in a college class/college life
- College students as a mentor
- Preparation for high school transition
- Advocacy of early college programs

Examples of staff's recommendation on helpful activities included:

More things to find the passion. I think something that I would also try to add to GEAR UP, find your true passion.

I think it would be cool if they sit through a college class. A day in the life of a college student. To let them know they may get up this time later in the morning because they sleep late. They still go to the library and they do research. They still go to lunch here.

I think that more of the hard stuff, tasks that have to be done. Having a checklist of things that they need to take care of or at least think about. Getting a chance for them to understand the finances behind college.



Staff had limited knowledge about family engagement support provided by the program. Staff who knew about the program's support for family engagement were most knowledgeable about family nights, followed by phone calls and home visits. Staff provided examples of successful family nights. They praised the informative nature of family nights. They reported that family nights were helpful to support parents' understanding of financial aid, stating that parents gained exposure to it when the facilitator walked them through the financial aid process on the website. Staff also mentioned phone calls and home visits provided by the GEAR UP facilitators as helpful in engaging parents in students' learning. Examples of staff's comments about family engagement support provided by the program included:

The feedback was all positive. There were some really good questions. There was no longer like, "Oh, college is an option, now we can't afford it." I think there were a lot of misconceptions that were clarified that night.

We have also done the family nights. The GEAR UP facilitator did a great job. What is the real cost in college? She broke it down to public and private, all different types of financial aid, even started going through steps of the actual financial aid process on the website. So the family could gain some exposure to it.

They had GEAR UP meetings with the parents. They had the 7th-grade families go upstairs and talk about GEAR UP. So that is all I know, but it does seem like they are trying to get engaged with the families, because we have family nights once a month.

The GEAR UP facilitator is always willing to help make phone calls and offers to reach out to parents for us, or to talk to parents and bring them in. So I know it is a huge help for us in reaching out and keeping parents informed and meeting with them so they know what is going on with their kids.



Staff participated in various professional development activities for students' college preparation.

Focus group participants mentioned that they already had a lot of opportunities for professional development, including the following topics: AVID strategies, SEL skills, and culturally responsive strategies. In addition, participants reported that incorporating knowledge and skills in their classroom enabled them to engage students in learning and supported students for future education.

Participants also suggested additional professional learning opportunities to learn more about (a) academic content, (b) developmentally appropriate information for teacher implementation in the classroom, (c) culturally responsive strategies, and (d) collaboration with teachers in other schools. Excerpts of staff's comments about professional development activities included:

I like the team building stuff obviously. I think those are fun. I am learning more about social emotional learning too. Because until they start believing you care, they are not going to start working for you, they are not going to be motivated. I have been trying to do these things in my class.

I think it's always good to have culturally responsive strategies, just because it's always good to take other people's perspectives into the way you talk to your students. Talking to students is something I like to focus on and make sure that I look at things through their eyes. So that's something I want to learn more.

It would be lovely to have some math professional development activities that would help me with what I am actually teaching. Incorporating other strategies is fine. So it would be nice to have any content-related professional development activities.

I'd like a better understanding of what is developmentally appropriate for them to understand and to know, as they are going through this program. So what types of things are being taught in 7th grade? What types of things that are going to be taught in 8th grade? So what is developmentally appropriate information for us, as teachers, to implement in the classroom would be helpful for me.



A handful of staff did not know much about the GEAR UP program. Some staff seemed to know little about GEAR UP activities. They were not clear about the responsibilities of GEAR UP facilitators. Examples of staff's comments about their limited knowledge about the GEAR UP program included:

We were not sure that was the facilitator's job or not. Maybe that's our lack of understanding to not be able to fully integrate the facilitator's role.

We don't really know why students are going there. Are they going there for tutoring or are they going there for counseling?

Conclusion

In summary, most of the focus group participants across five GEAR UP campuses understood the GEAR UP program. Many staff provided positive comments about the GEAR UP activities and GEAR UP facilitators, including:

- Staff reported the GEAR UP program was beneficial to the teachers, students, and campus.
- Staff indicated the program provided students with opportunities to be exposed to different options for their future education and career.
- Staff consistently recognized the positive role of GEAR UP facilitators in supporting students' college preparation. Teachers reported that GEAR UP facilitators supported their teaching.
- Staff reported they supported students' college preparation and expected their students to go to college.
- Staff reported APIE tutoring was helpful in supporting students' academic progress.
- Staff reported college visits were helpful for academic and college awareness support.
- Staff indicated family nights were informative for parents to understand how to prepare students for college.

Findings obtained from staff focus groups echoed those obtained from student focus groups conducted in Fall 2018. Both staff and students indicated that:

- College visits were most helpful GEAR UP activity in preparing students for college.
- GEAR UP facilitators were helpful in preparing students for college.
- Staff expected students to go to college and were supportive of students' college preparation.
- More information about college requirements and financial aid are needed to prepare students for college.

Findings from focus groups provided an assessment of the program's progress toward achieving intended outcomes. It appeared that much of the GEAR UP work was on track and achieving desired outcomes. In some schools, program staff may consider ways to increase the engagement of school staff in the program. The feedback provided from the focus group participants will inform program staff to make implementation decisions and to evaluate the degree to which program activities were being adopted.

References

- Looby, K., Pazera, C., Stelling, L., & Wiggins, A. (2014). *Austin Partners in Education: Annual evaluation report, 2013-2014*. Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District
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July 2019

Publication 18.16