

# The GEAR UP initiative comes to Granite Park Junior High

Oct 03, 2019 02:19PM • By Bill Hardesty



**Mayor Cherie Wood speaks to Granite Park Junior High students during GEAR UP assembly. (Bill Hardesty/City Journal)**

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Mayor Cherie Wood proclaimed the week of Sept. 23-27 as GEAR UP Week in South Salt Lake. You might think this has something to do with the fall hunting season. Sorry, no. GEAR UP has to do with helping low-income students "gear up" for higher education.

## **GEAR UP**

"The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative is one of the largest and most effective programs focused on increasing the college and career readiness of low-income students in communities nationwide," according to the National Council for Community and Education Partnership website.

The program has three strategic goals:

1. increasing the post-secondary expectations and readiness of students
2. improving high school graduation and post-secondary enrollment rates
3. raising the knowledge of post-secondary options, preparation, and financing among students and families

"GEAR UP provides multi-year grants to states or partnerships to deliver support and resources to students and their families, starting no later than the seventh grade (middle school) thorough high school and onward to fulfill their dreams of attaining a post-secondary education," the proclamation states.

GEAR UP does not use a one-size-fits-all approach. Each program is tailored to the community as "the program empowers local leaders from K-12, higher education, and community leaders to create and advance a shared agenda to strengthen

pathways to college and career success."

Currently, GEAR UP serves approximately 707,970 students in 3,842 secondary schools across the nation. To be eligible for GEAR UP, at least of 50% of a school's studentbody must be enrolled in the federal free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) program.

This is a federal matching grant. Every federal dollar is required to be matched by a local dollar. However, this match can take many forms. Besides cash donations, in-kind donations such as calculators for students and services such as time spent by volunteers and teachers contribute to the match requirement.

In our highly partisan environment, this program has received support and funding across the political spectrum for 20 years. In fiscal year 2019, Congress appropriated \$360 million for GEAR UP, a \$10 million increase over the prior year. However, even with the added funds, the competition among schools to take part is extremely difficult. In fact, less than one in 12 applications are funded.

Utah State University (USU) applies for a grant and awards to qualifying schools. Granite Park Junior High School was selected to participate in conjunction with Granite School District. Sharla Bynum, a 23-year educator and council member from the District 3, heads up the program at Granite Park.

One of the key parts of the GEAR UP program is that college and career readiness begins in middle school and continues through high school years. This means that Bynum will support students and their families not only at Granite Park Junior High School, but also as they continue their education at Cottonwood High School in the coming years.

At Granite Park, the GEAR UP is applied to the entire eighth-grade class.

One of the important restrictions of the GEAR UP grant is that it cannot be used to replace a program. The money must be used to enhance or add to a current program. For Granite Park students, this means added AVID (advancement via individual determination) participants and a new coding class. For teachers and administration, it involved professional development opportunities this past summer.

### **GEAR UP Week**

"The main reason we celebrate GEAR UP Week is bring awareness to the program," explained Bynum.

The week began with a student assembly including Wood reading her proclamation. The assembly was followed up with daily lunchtime activities spread around the school. On Monday and Thursday, the activity was sponsored by educational partners like Education at Work and Salt Lake Community College's TRIO college bound program. On Tuesday, the students watched a TED Talk about college and career and on Wednesday, the students played college bingo.

Congressman Ben McAdams also taped a special video message for the students.

The favorite activity by students and teachers was wearing college hats and gear all week since students are not allowed to wear baseball caps at school.