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Gear Up grant kicks off second year in Cottonwood school

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COTTONWOOD - Walls practically papered in college banners, a classroom on the Cottonwood Middle School campus is completely dedicated to getting the class of 2018 to think about college.

Cottonwood-Oak Creek School District was awarded a federal Gear Up grant that supports a "cohort" of students from seventh grade through high school. The district held its kick-off event Thursday night for its students, who will enter high school next fall.

The program, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, sends students to college summer programs for youth and aims to get each student to visit a college campus.

Gear Up Coordinator Gretchen Wesbrock said she and assistant Marisol Burnett meet with students one-on-one to discuss college and career options. The Gear Up classroom facilitates these meetings, and also serves as a lunch-time homework help area.

Students come in before and after school to hang out, ask questions about colleges and explore the majors they might choose.

"It's a pretty hoppin' space when the kids are in here," Wesbrock said.

Gear Up comes to a school district usually once, and attempts to change the culture at the school so that a college-readiness atmosphere is part of the norm, Wesbrock said. [Northern Arizona University](#) has been awarded the grant since 1999 and partnered with schools in the state for three cycles.

Wesbrock and Burnett are employed by Mingus Union High School, and will follow the cohort to Mingus when they finish at Cottonwood Middle School.



Gear Up Coordinator Gretchen Wesbrock and assistant Marisol Burnett meet with students one-on-one to discuss college and career options in the Gear Up Lab. VVN/Jon Pelletier



On Tuesday afternoon, parents, students and educators congregated at the cafeteria of Mingus Union High School for the official kick-off of this year's Gear Up program. VVN/Jon Pelletier

Many students have given up on college by the time they reach high school, thinking they don't have the money or resources to attend.

"This program, certainly the goal is to get more low-income students ready for college and career, but they've seen more traction with going with the whole cohort and changing culture at schools and with teachers and families," Wesbrock said.

COCSO has one counselor for all of its schools who primarily focuses on at-risk youth. Gear Up supplements that and makes contact with all students.

"There's money, resources and time to do things that a district, especially a district like ours, they don't have the resources to be able to do," Wesbrock said.

Family outreach is another component of the program, and a huge influence on some kids' decisions to go to school. Students can tell when parents struggle financially to provide the basics, sometimes discouraging them from even considering college price tags.

"When I look at the struggles some of our students have that they share, and there's many more that they probably don't, I think it's a wonder that some of them can even concentrate in school with some of the things they manage in their home life," Wesbrock said.

Wesbrock was the associate director of housing and residential life at NAU, and focuses on programs that train students how to study, organize themselves and manage their time to make sure they actually finish college when they get there.

"It was amazing to me, having worked with a lot of first-gen college students, low-income, so many of them would get there and then they would not stay," she said. "College access is also the skills they need to actually finish college."

Burnett designed a graphic that shows the high school classes students need to get into college. The image rolls up neatly into a pen, a novelty students loved.

Her associate's degree in graphic design and her ability to speak Spanish make for a unique combination of skills that Gear Up needs. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Spanish from [Arizona State University](#).

She said she can relate to the struggle the students are going through, having been one of those kids who just didn't do well in school.

"Because of this program, in the beginning I told Gretchen, I think I want to go back to school," Burnett said. "I decided to apply for the ASU program, I got in, in January, and I started in the fall."

Daniel Chavez's son Jordan wants to go to Arizona State University after his graduation in 2018.

"One of the ways he wants to get there is through sports and being able to get a scholarship, hopefully," Chavez said. "This kid's got the desire and he puts that all into everything. That's what makes him so great."

Chavez, a cook at KFC, said his son has made a huge improvement since the Gear Up program started for Cottonwood Middle School's seventh graders last year.

"He struggled, when he was younger, with reading," Chavez said. "Math and English, he really struggled with it. But he was determined to do it."