

GEAR UP aims to help more students reach college level

By SUSAN RANDALL, Casa Grande Dispatch | Posted: Thursday, September 4, 2014 10:59 am

The federally funded GEAR UP program targets seventh- graders and stays with them through middle and high school to help them prepare for college, GEAR UP Coordinator Judy Merrill told the Casa Grande Union High School District Governing Board Tuesday.

Coordinator April Ortega said Wednesday that seventh-graders from Cactus Middle School, Casa Grande Middle School, Villago Middle School and Toltec Elementary School started in the GEAR UP program two years ago and are now freshmen at Vista Grande and Casa Grande Union high schools. Freshmen from Sacaton and Stanfield middle schools are part of the program, too, so every freshman at Vista and Union is part of the program.

“That’s why we’re having the kickoff,” Ortega said, “so parents can meet us, and kind of get to know us a little bit more.”

GEAR UP is short for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, Merrill said. Its purpose is to increase the number of students from low-income, high-poverty areas who graduate from high school and go to college or technical school.

GEAR UP leaders work with the students individually, she said, interviewing them to find their interests and steering them toward career exploration.

“We call them in and look up their grades, see what they are interested in, make sure they are involved in clubs, encourage them to be involved in different sports and clubs,” Ortega said.

The coordinators monitor the students’ attendance and academic progress and provide tutors, mentors and credit recovery, if needed, skill-building workshops, visits to different colleges and universities, career field trips, financial aid workshops, job shadowing and summer enrichment.

Merrill said the program is in the process of recruiting mentors from Central Arizona College. This year’s freshmen will be part of the GEAR UP program until they graduate from high school in 2018 and finish their first year of college.

The GEAR UP kickoff tailgate party for freshmen and their families is scheduled to begin at 4:30 p.m. Sept. 17 in the Vista Grande parking lot. That’s the night of the Vista and Union football game, Merrill said.

Ortega said Superintendent Shannon Goodsell will roast hot dogs. Power 98.3 FM radio will broadcast live from the party.

“The girl that is coming to broadcast is actually a GEAR UP recipient, and she went to college on a GEAR UP scholarship,” Merrill said.