

# Verde Independent

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## **Gear Up integrates out-of-district freshmen to life at Mingus Union**

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COTTONWOOD -- A quick hug and a few hi-best-friends later, freshmen Serina Stanley and senior Link Crew leader Charles Novak are one of Mingus Union High School's transition successes.

"He was awesome," Stanley said of having Novak around at the start of school. "He was really helpful. He showed me around where all the classes and stuff were."

Through Gear Up, Stanley and the rest of the 2018 cohort spent a whole day on campus before the official start of classes to get to know each other and their Link Crews, said Gear Up coordinator Gretchen Wesbrock.

Novak said he applied to be a Link Leader to help students get on track to a successful high school experience. He and Stanley met during Freshman Day, when Wesbrock led students in leadership and team-building activities.

"Out of sheer happenstance, we sat next to each other in the gym," he said. "And so I was like, hey, we already know each other."

Link Crew is a new program at Mingus that pairs upperclassmen, selected last spring through an application process, with incoming freshmen in a buddy system for navigating high school.

Novak gets involved on campus often. Among other extracurriculars, Novak is a football player, theater technician and advanced placement student. Outside of school, he's part of the youth advisory commission to Cottonwood city council.

His dad, Tyler Novak, teaches art at Mingus as well.

"I've had the opportunity to observe a lot of Link relationships, and that was one that I saw just an instantaneous bond," Wesbrock said. "I'm sure it's representative of many others that are out there."

Part of the new year is being spent integrating students from outside the Cottonwood-Oak Creek School District with Gear Up.

"The big focus for the beginning of school was on that transition piece for all of them, regardless of whether or not they're familiar with Gear Up," she said. "That's where Link Crew came into play."

The next transition group she'll focus on are those moving from districts with very small classes.

"I'm going to be pulling together small groups, probably at lunch, of kids who are coming from smaller schools that maybe don't have that large of a cohort," she said.

Clarkdale-Jerome School sends the biggest chunk of students to Mingus, second only to the Cottonwood-Oak Creek mass. Wesbrock said even within Cottonwood-Oak Creek, kids are coming from remote campuses like Oak Creek School, with 30 students to a grade.

"They might be connected to Gear Up, but they're not all connected to one another," Wesbrock said. "So I'm going to spend some time there."

She'll meet with groups of students from American Heritage Academy, Accelerated Learning, and the Beaver Creek district.

"That's an even bigger transition, when you're coming in with a really small group of kids into this really large environment," Wesbrock said.

Visits to freshmen English classes will get them started on Arizona's career information system a semester earlier than in past years.

"We're introducing that early because I'm going to start meeting one on one with freshmen, doing what we call PEPS," she said.

Post-secondary education planning sessions give students a chance to think ahead to where they want to be, and plan steps to get themselves there. Wesbrock said she'll meet individually with each of Mingus' 310 freshmen by winter break.

She said she'll also use this as an opportunity to get students into extracurricular activities, whether it's a sport or a club.

"Or, if we don't have that club, let's start that club," Wesbrock said. "I'm trying to get a robotics club up and going."

The club has come and gone at Mingus, but has existed for a few years steady at CMS and started



Freshmen "linklet" Serina Stanley hugs her Link Crew leader, senior Charles Novak.

VVN/Yvonne Gonzalez

up at other campuses as well.

"We have a number of students who are interested in that particular part of STEM," Wesbrock said. "We have to get something going to fill that need."

Wesbrock said Link leaders meet monthly to learn new skills to help them with anything from problem-solving to building trust with their "linklets," which can sometimes be difficult.

"Part of it is just that continued contact," Wesbrock said. "See them in the hallway and hello and say their name, call them on the phone and check in. Even if they say everything's fine, you made that effort, and you never know when that time will come when they say, yes, I do have a question."

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