

It Wasn't A Fluke

School intervention gets results, but Payson dropped its program

By Michele Nelson

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After the Roundup reported on the graduation and college bound numbers of Kristi Ford's GEAR UP grant class, some expressed doubt about numbers that seemed too good to be true. Her preliminary numbers suggested the six-year mentoring and intervention program boosted the college application and attendance rate by perhaps 50 percent — and helped students earn a record \$1.25 million in scholarships.

But results from Northern Arizona University's (NAU) GEAR UP program confirm Ford's numbers.

Ford received her grant from Eastern Arizona College (EAC). In comparison to EAC, NAU has incorporated GEAR UP into its School of Education teacher training program to create a whole office to administer the grant and support the schools receiving aid.

NAU has completed two GEAR UP grant cycles, one in 2006 and the other in 2012.

The 2006 class had an 82 percent high school graduation rate compared to a state average of 69 percent.

Seventy-five percent of the 2006 class said they were college bound, compared to 45 percent statewide. Payson's numbers closely matched those results.

These numbers were again confirmed when NAU received another six-year grant for the class of 2012.

In that class, 83 percent graduated, while statewide only 76 percent graduated.

Of those graduates, the GEAR UP class had 72 percent with college plans compared to only 51 percent statewide.

So, how does the GEAR UP grant create such impressive results?

NAU has a website chock-full of research on the topic. (<http://nau.edu/coe/gear-up/>)

In part of its research, NAU has a paper entitled "What does it take to Create a College and Career-Ready School Culture?"

The researchers quote Rogers, Creed, and Glendon's 2008 study that reported schools that recognize and support students in their career or college interests have more success preparing students for life after high school.

Those schools allow teachers and counselors the time and space to work with students on their academic and social skills to prepare them to succeed in either college or a career.

The federal government started the GEAR UP grant in 1999 to improve the graduation rates and successful post high school plans of students in low-income school districts. The federal government defines low-income districts by how many students qualify for free and reduced lunches. To qualify for a GEAR UP grant, at least 50 percent of the student population must qualify for free and reduced lunches. Payson has 70 percent of its student population on free and reduced lunches.

Schools chosen to participate as a GEAR UP grant recipient school have a full-time GEAR UP coordinator who provides specific GEAR UP intervention and services to the student.

“Most importantly, coordinators develop the types of trusting relationships with students and their families that foster student success,” wrote NAU on a fact sheet about the grant.

Here in Payson, Ford decided visiting every house of the students in her 2014 class would help her understand them. As a result, she knew how many siblings they had, if their parents were divorced, if they struggled to put food on the table or to keep the heat on.

It was that intimate knowledge of the students’ lives that helped Ford during interventions as she worked to fill in the students’ gaps in core academic concepts.

During a freshman remediation class, she found students had gaps in their math knowledge.

“I started with kindergarten math. The students had no problem understanding the concepts. Then I moved to first grade — that was fine too. But when I reached second-grade math, some of the students had gaps in their knowledge,” said Ford.

When she went to ask the students’ parents about what happened during that year of their life, Ford was surprised to learn that usually the family had suffered some sort of crisis, from health issues to divorce or even death.

It seemed to her that the students had checked out during that time and simply could not absorb the lesson. With a safe place to learn from a trusted teacher, the students filled in the gaps and found more success in their high school classes.

The Payson school board voted to join with EAC this year again to apply for the GEAR UP grant, but, unfortunately, EAC did not qualify.

Ford’s group has graduated and the district decided not to continue the program with its own money, so Ford found herself out of a job.

Ford has since found a job in Utah and moved there this summer.

The GEAR UP grant will pay Ford to follow up on her students to see how their first year out of high school goes.

Last year, the district also had an Education and Career Action Plan (ECAP) coordinator to augment Ford's efforts to make sure every student had a college and vocational plan.

The ECAP position was created to address new graduation requirements imposed by the Legislature. Students must have a plan for post high school, a resume, complete a job interview and have the ability to apply for a scholarship or business loan.

Last year, ECAP coordinator Marlene Armstrong split her time between the high school and the middle school to prepare eighth-grade students by mapping out the classes they would take for four years to reach their post high school goals. She then helped high school students to find scholarships and complete graduation requirements.

However, the school board decided to cut the ECAP position in half to save money.

With her position diminished, Armstrong decided to leave the district to accept a principal position at a Phoenix charter school.

In her place, Don Heizer will work at the high school half time as the ECAP coordinator and half time at the middle school as a student behavior specialist. The middle school will no longer have an ECAP coordinator.

Source: Payson Roundup
www.paysonroundup.com