

Gear Up teaches 'spirit of exploration'

Mingus Union on schedule to graduate roughly 270 seniors, with 86 percent planning for college



Gear Up Coordinator Gretchen Wesbrock, center, has worked with Mingus Union High School seniors Christyana Fletcher, Andy Davila, Charly Diaz and Saya Federbush, from left, since they were seventh graders in the Cottonwood-Oak Creek School District. (Photo by Bill Helm)



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COTTONWOOD – They say that life is what happens when your busy making other plans.

But what happens when you don't have a plan?

At Mingus Union High School, the Class of 2018 has a plan – and they've been working that plan for six years.

Key points to Gear Up

- Gear Up works to raise the academic aspirations of the entire cohort of students, not just selected individuals. Gear Up works to cultivate motivation, knowledge and skills need to succeed along the pathway to post-secondary education. This includes students who are

Last year, 86 percent of the college's juniors indicated that their goal was to pursue some sort of postsecondary education, such as four-year university, community college or technical school.

For Mingus Union's Gretchen Wesbrock, it's important for students to have opportunities – and to understand what their opportunities are.

"We know that having post-secondary education increases a person's ability to earn money and do work they enjoy,"

pursuing technical/trade schools, community colleges, universities, and the military.

- Gear Up started with the Class of 2018 when they were in seventh grade.
- Gear Up serves the entire Class of 2018 cohort all the way through high school.
- Gear Up enlists the involvement of parents, teachers, counselors, administrators and community groups.

Why? There are many reasons why. Here are a few ...

- 19 of the 20 highest paying occupations require a Bachelor's Degree or greater.
- 11 of the 20 fastest growing occupations require an Associate's Degree or greater.
- By 2018, 61 percent of the jobs in Arizona will require some training beyond high school.

Wesbrock says. "We want to help build in them the spirit of exploration."

How? With a plethora of overlapping services and interventions that help promote the knowledge, motivation and skills needed to succeed in post-secondary education – and conversely, to succeed in the professional world.

Gear Up provides academic advisement, career exploration and exposure, college visits, skill-building and financial aid workshops, help with Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Postsecondary Education Planning Sessions (PEPS), as well as with credit recovery, summer enrichment, parent involvement and advisement.

According to Wesbrock, Gear Up also helps "demystify post-secondary education."

The purpose of Gear Up is "for every senior to walk across the graduation stage with all of the necessary steps completed so that they are college and career ready – life ready," Wesbrock says. "Building work ethic, critical thinking skills, learning to interact with other people."

Gear Up

In 2012, Mingus Union High School District was awarded a discretionary/competitive grant better known as Gear Up – Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate

Programs.

This million-dollar bestowment began in fall 2012 to "significantly increase the number of students from low-income communities who stay in school and are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education," says Wesbrock, the Gear Up Coordinator at Mingus Union High School.

The objective isn't to force college on anyone, Wesbrock says. It's about choices, information, knowledge, and making plans for the future.

The grant is actually for seven years, as the community's Class of 2018 students will continue to be involved in Gear Up though their first year out of high school.

Says Wesbrock, Gear Up is "not an opt-in or opt-out" program.

"No matter who comes in, or when they were in, they're in," she says. "If you're in the Class of 2018, you're in Gear Up."

Of the 179 seventh graders in Cottonwood-Oak Creek School District in 2012-2018, 135 are at Mingus Union High School.

Mingus Union is on track to graduate close to 270 students in May 2018 – and each of them are grandfathered in to Gear Up.

Getting geared up

While becoming an administrator at Mingus Union High School, Jennifer Chilton applied for the Gear Up grant to "bolster college access programs."

"Gear Up has been an amazing boon for Mingus, a wonderful support for the Class of 2018," says Chilton, now the Director of Communications for Sedona Oak Creek Unified School District.

Because the program began with seventh graders, Chilton had an opportunity to seek partnership with Cottonwood-Oak Creek administrators.

"The partnership that flourished between MUHSD and COCSU will be one of the lasting improvements generated within this grant," Chilton says.

Essential

Chilton recalls that initially, there were delays at the federal level for funding, and that it was a "belated surprise when I received the award notification."

With the delay in funding, Chilton had limited time to find someone to run Gear Up.

This Week's Circulars

The image shows a grid of six promotional circulars from various retailers. The top row includes JCPenney (60% off), CVS Pharmacy (100 Satisfac Guarantee), and another CVS Pharmacy circular. The bottom row includes Dick's Sporting Goods (39.99, 49.99), and Mattress Firm (Labor Day Sale, Free Adjustable Base, King Queen Twin). Each circular has a 'Hover for Circular' label below it.

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"I had seen that with the success of this type of program so dependent on relationships with passionately caring adults, finding an inspiring leader was essential," Chilton says.

'Gear Up superstar'

Chilton says she can "still remember my heart fluttering" as she interviewed Gretchen Wesbrock.

"She magically appeared at the point when I was despairing of finding just the right person to nurture our kids," she says. "I was elated. She is magic. She is a blessing. She is a Gear Up superstar. I'm grateful to have worked with her and for her absolute heart."

According to Lynette Prouty, Gear Up – and Wesbrock – have been a "tremendous help to the students and parents alike."

"Planning for college can be very overwhelming, especially for first time college students," says Prouty, whose daughter Katelyn is a senior at Mingus Union. "I believe this program has given many families encouragement and support to meet their goals, whether it is a four-year university, a two year college or a technical/trade school."

Prouty also says she appreciated that Gear Up provided students with study aids for the ACT and SAT tests, resources for scholarships and how to pay for college.

"She provided information on the many options for continuing their education and encouraged students to seriously consider these options," Prouty says. "Academically, the program was a huge help in providing the resources and assistance needed for college planning and test prep. I think the program has helped many students make education a goal when it may not have been before."

The gift that keeps on giving

The 179 students of the 2012 Gear Up inaugural class came from Cottonwood Middle, Oak Creek and Mountain View Preparatory schools in Cottonwood.

Though the original class eventually moved onto high school, Cottonwood-Oak Creek was able to secure a Middle Grades Initiative (MGI) Grant to help sustain some of the Gear Up opportunities that were available to the Class of 2018.

Says Kelli Rhoda, eighth grade mathematics and science teacher at Mountain View Preparatory, the MGI grant has helped C-OC the past four years to purchase "much needed science equipment, social studies materials, non-fiction content area books, technology, math enrichment materials, career fairs and funding for professional development."

COCSO also continued with the college and career aspect by utilizing Arizona Career Information System (AzCIS) "to help our sixth- through eighth-grade students set goals and make plans for their future," Rhoda says.

And Mountain View Preparatory has continued to take its eighth grade students on visits to colleges.

"We try to visit a different college each quarter," Rhoda says. "In fact, we just got back from our tour of Arizona State University on Thursday."

Looking forward to 2018

Though somewhat bittersweet, the Gear Up program will end for Mingus Union and Cottonwood-Oak Creek in May.

But the school's teachers and administrators have plenty to look forward to in 2018 when their graduates, their Gear Up cohorts, graduate high school and move forward with their plans to either go to school or go to work.

Says Chilton, Mingus Union "has been elevated by Gretchen's passion, commitment, energy, and morality."

"The inspired futures of the soon-to-be graduates touched by Gretchen Wesbrock's grace will be the grant's greatest legacy," Chilton says.

Says Rhoda, many of the Gear Up students "would have been lost had they not had this program to help them along their way."

"I know that in middle school, Gear Up ignited a spark within our students that encouraged them to start dreaming," Rhoda says. "It enabled them to start having those

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conversations about their future and it gave them someone to talk to, someone who believed in them and someone who cared about them.”

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