

Oregon GEAR UP

College: It's not a dream, it's a plan.

Key Evaluation Findings for Year 4 (2017–18)

The goal of the Oregon GEAR UP program is to ensure that Oregon's low-income middle school and high school students are prepared for, pursue, and succeed in postsecondary education, whether that be a college degree, certificate, apprenticeship or other career training.

To accomplish this, Oregon GEAR UP works with select middle schools and high schools over seven years to create a college-going culture by providing funding and technical assistance, professional development for educators, and enrichment opportunities for students. The initiative is grounded in an evidence-based framework developed by Oregon GEAR UP that relies on five research-based principles, titled the 5 “R”s: Reaching Higher, Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, and Raising Awareness.

In 2017–18, the fourth year of the current federal grant, Oregon GEAR UP was implemented in 35 middle and high schools in 21 school districts (from here on referred to as “clusters”) and served over 6,900 students in grade 7 through grade 13 (the first year of postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation).

Conducted by Metis Associates, an independent research firm, the Oregon GEAR UP evaluation is designed to assess program implementation in participating schools and the impact on key outcomes areas, as well as document promising practices, challenges, and lessons learned.

This Evaluation Brief highlights key findings and lessons learned for the 2017–18 school year.

The Brief is organized by the following areas:

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- Conclusions and recommendations (page 24)



SOURCES OF DATA

- ✓ School data (demographic, academic, attendance)
- ✓ Student surveys (N=6,309)
- ✓ Parent surveys (N=3,362)
- ✓ Educator surveys (N=738)
- ✓ GEAR UP coordinator/administrator surveys (N=35)
- ✓ Site visits at 3 case study schools, which included interviews and focus groups with each school's principal and GEAR UP coordinator, and a total of 12 educators, 37 students, and 10 parents
- ✓ Data from the locally-developed College and Career Readiness Inventory



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- GEAR UP continues to play a substantial role in promoting a college-going culture within schools and among students through offering a wide range of services and activities to current and former students and families. Students and educators identified college visits and the summer leadership camp as two of the most impactful GEAR UP activities in this area.
- Student and parent expectations have remained high over the last four years; educator expectations remained constant and were considerably lower than student and parent expectations.
- The cost of college continues to be one of the main perceived barriers or concerns that may prevent students from pursuing their postsecondary education goals.
- GEAR UP is helping schools increase the rigor of instruction and provide the academic and social emotional supports that students need to succeed in school. Students and staff identified efforts that have been particularly successful, including in-school and afterschool tutoring opportunities, AP and dual enrollment classes, and AVID.
- Academic underperformance remains a common challenge in most schools, particularly in math. Educators want to make sure students realize the importance of academic success in high school as it relates to their college plans and aspirations. Students want more choice in their courses to keep them motivated.
- Almost all GEAR UP coordinators and administrators said in surveys that they believe GEAR UP has helped foster relevance by linking students' career aspirations to their postsecondary educational goals. Students said career fairs and lunch with professionals helped them think of relevant college and career paths, and staff and parents saw how those events got students energized and looking forward to an "end goal." Notwithstanding these successful activities, evaluation results continued to indicate that schools could do more to make learning relevant for students.
- Consistent with prior years' findings, there is agreement among educators, students, and parents that, overall, schools provide a welcoming environment where students can develop nurturing relationships with adults and peers. Educator involvement in college and career readiness has remained constant over the past few years.
- GEAR UP is helping raise awareness of postsecondary education options and financing in schools. Students' self-reported knowledge of entrance requirements has increased significantly over time. Most parents still over-estimate the cost of college.
- During site visits, school staff and parents expressed a desire to see more focus and emphasis in GEAR UP on trade and vocational schools as a viable postsecondary option for their students.
- Getting parents, guardians, and the broader community more involved, and not having enough time or resources for implementing activities and assessing their effectiveness, were identified by some schools as challenges when implementing GEAR UP activities.
- Notably, many GEAR UP coordinators and administrators reported that staff buy-in has improved.

GEAR UP has provided invaluable information and inspiration for our rural students, many of whom would otherwise struggle to find a path to college.

GEAR UP gives our students and their families information that allows them to see the future possibilities of higher education. Often, it seems that our students or parents don't realize the opportunities that are in reach. Creating awareness and interest in college has led to students being more proactive about preparing for life after high school. It has been great to see how our students respond to learning about college and future careers.

GEAR UP Educators



THE NEED AND CONTEXT FOR OREGON GEAR UP

Oregon GEAR UP is being implemented in 21 rural communities, serving 29 cohort schools and 6 priority schools.

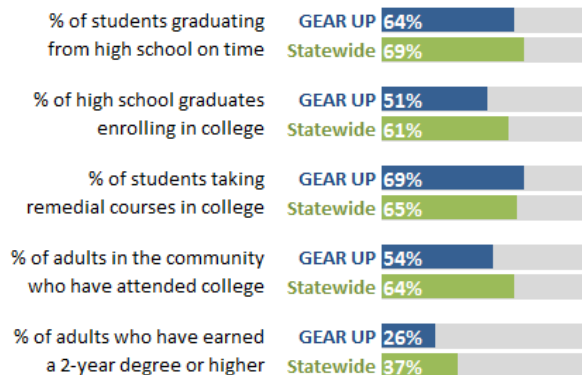
- **Cohort schools** follow a grade-level cohort approach, thus serving all students within target grades. In Year 1 (2014–15), cohort schools began serving students in grade 7; each subsequent year, they continue to serve these students while adding a new cohort of seventh-graders.
- **Priority schools** were part of the federal grant from 2008–14 and have continued from 2014–21 under a modified direct service model that targets “at risk” or disengaged students within target grades. In 2014–15, priority schools served students in grades 8–13. Each year, they continue serving these same students without adding a new cohort, thus, “losing” a grade level each year.

Oregon GEAR UP communities lag behind the rest of the state and the nation in key education indicators. Baseline data for the target communities show a strong need for GEAR UP.

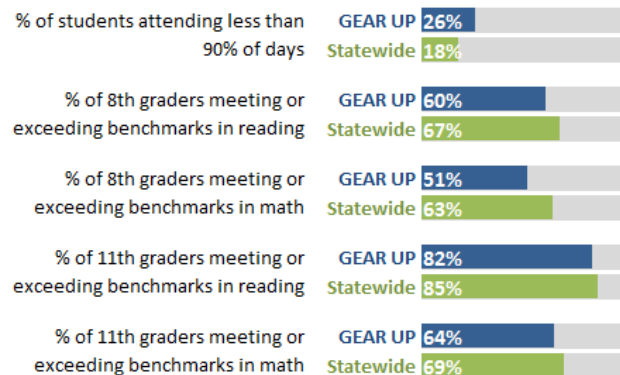
COMMON CHALLENGES IN RURAL EDUCATION

- ✓ High poverty
- ✓ Under-resourced schools
- ✓ Declining school enrollment & local employment opportunities
- ✓ Geographic isolation and transportation challenges
- ✓ High staff turnover & student mobility
- ✓ Limited availability of advanced courses and electives
- ✓ Limited exposure to postsecondary education

Baseline Educational Attainment Indicators (GEAR UP Communities vs. Statewide)

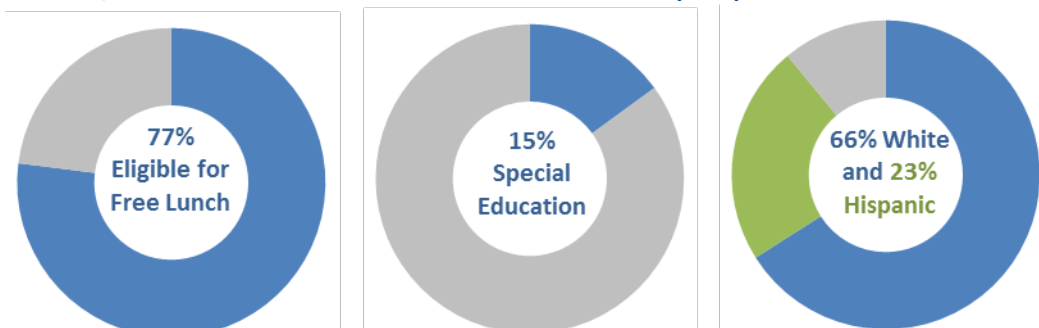


Baseline Academic and Attendance Indicators (GEAR UP Communities vs. Statewide)



*Source: Oregon GEAR UP proposal to the US Department of Education (2014)

In 2017–18, GEAR UP served 5,751 students in grades 7–10 in cohort schools and 1,170 students in grades 11–13 in priority schools; most students live in low-income households (77%).



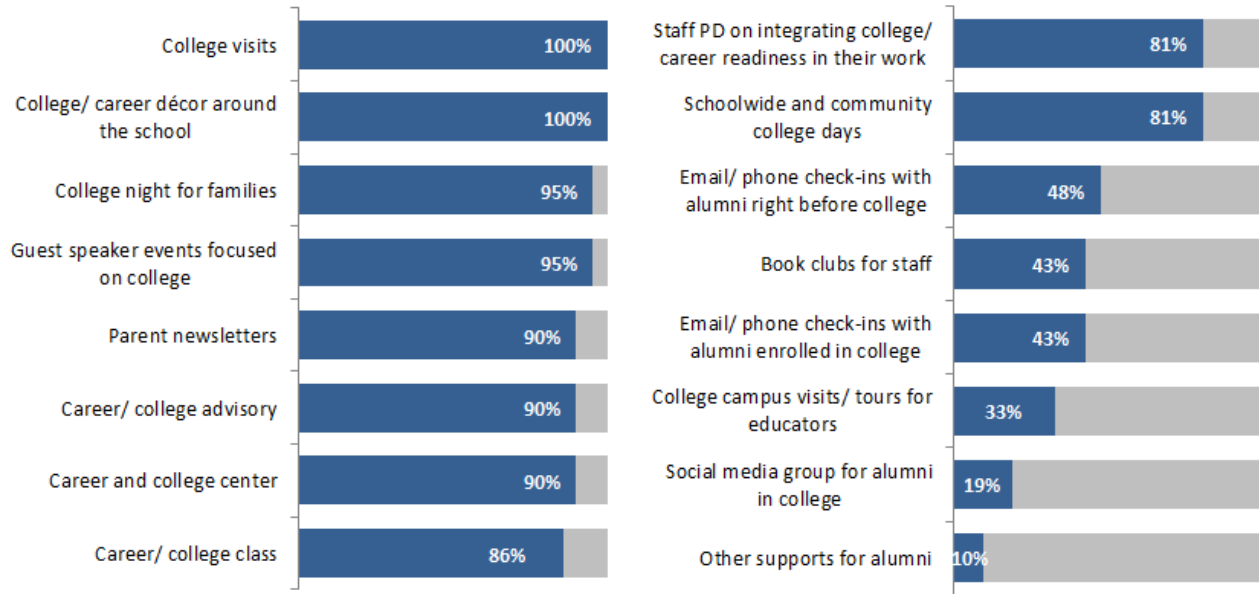
*Source: ODE enrollment data for the entire 2017–18 school year.

RAISING EXPECTATIONS AND PROMOTING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

GOAL: SUPPORT SCHOOLS IN BUILDING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE BY CREATING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS, POLICIES, AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS THAT SUPPORT ALL STUDENTS' PURSUIT OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION.

As in prior years, in 2017–18, GEAR UP schools offered a wide range of services and activities to current and former students and families, designed to support a school-wide college-going culture. The most frequent types of some of the activities and strategies—used by at least 95% of GEAR UP schools—were college visits (100%), college and career décor (100%), college night for families (95%), and guest speaker events (95%).

REACHING HIGHER: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



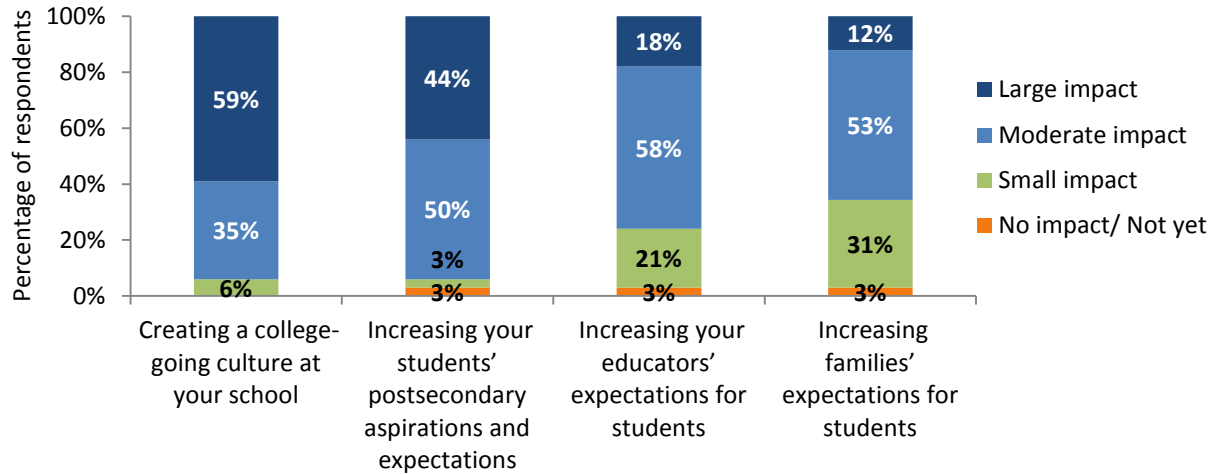
This year, there was a significant increase in the percentage of schools offering a number of services, notably college night for families (from 76% in 2016–17 to 95% in 2017–18), staff PD on integrating college and career readiness in their work (from 52% to 81%), and schoolwide community college days (from 57% to 81%).

GEAR UP continues to have a substantial impact in promoting a college-going culture within schools and among students. The large majority of GEAR UP coordinators and administrators reported that GEAR UP has supported their schools to a *large or moderate extent* in increasing students' postsecondary aspirations and expectations (94%) and creating a college-going culture (94%). About three quarters of coordinators and administrators (76%) said the same about increasing educators' expectations for students, an increase from last year (65%). A smaller majority said this about students' families (65%). (See chart on the following page.) During one site visit, the school principal noted, "more kids are talking about college...they're talking about their futures more."

There were some significant differences between cohort and priority schools: 71% of GEAR UP coordinators and administrators at priority schools reported that GEAR UP had a *large impact* on increasing students' aspirations and expectations, compared with 37% at cohort schools; at priority schools 33% reported a *large impact* on increasing families' expectations, compared with 8% at cohort schools.



IMPACT OF GEAR UP ON REACHING HIGHER (COORDINATOR/ADMIN SURVEYS)



College visits continue to be instrumental in motivating students to pursue a postsecondary education, according to students and staff. Students also mentioned that activities like the summer leadership camp, which helped build their confidence, have also been important.

- During site visits at three schools, the principals, coordinators, administrators, and students we spoke with all agreed that **college visits** continued to be a particularly important and impactful component of the GEAR UP program, especially as it relates to motivating students to continue their education beyond high school. Schools are very dedicated to providing many trip opportunities to students. As one school administrator said, “we're able to take our kids at all levels to go to those places and see different schools, whereas before we had GEAR UP, I think we were going to one annually.”
- Staff and administrators at two schools also shared that they have started to include college or career-related activities in any and all field trips at their school (at one school, this approach was also followed during athletic team's games or tournaments). Some administrators also indicated they see an even larger positive impact of college visits in their middle schools. One school staff member shared: “I see the looks on our kids' faces when they come back from the field trips, and they've never been on a college campus, or they've never really thought about going to college. [The visit] helps them to realize that it is attainable for anybody. They just have to put their mind to doing it.”
- From the student perspective, students frequently mentioned that they found college trips very helpful and exciting, especially when the visits had a student-led tour, or even better, a **tour led by alumni of their own high school**, and when they could choose specific colleges to see based on their specific major or career interests. Students indicated these opportunities helped them learn about the programs the college had to offer while also showing them a “day in the life” of a college student.
- Students at two schools also shared that the **summer leadership camp**—available to 7th through 12th grade students and held on a college campus—was helpful to building up their confidence in general, as well as their

“I noticed [on college trips] there were kids who said, ‘I didn't plan on going to college, but now I kind of want to, because I got to see what it was like.’”

—GEAR UP Student

“On the way home [from one college trip], on the bus, there were a couple of 8th grade girls that were sitting there discussing how they would design their own dorm rooms. And I thought, ‘Wow.’ I love that GEAR UP starts at 7th and 8th grade. Those seeds that they plant, they're so important.”

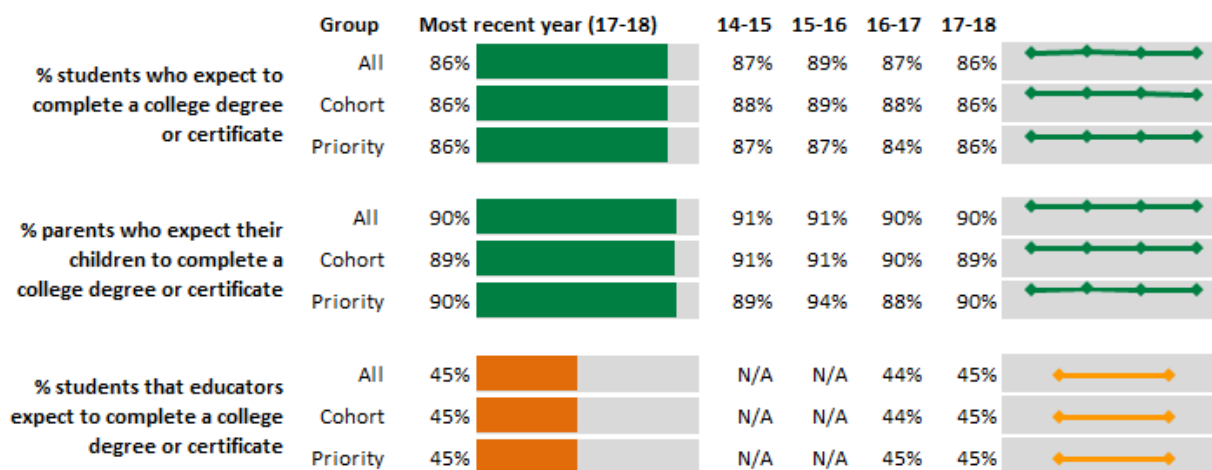
—GEAR UP Staff and Parent

confidence in pursuing education beyond high school and/or a career of their choice. Students agreed that the leadership skills, including risk-taking and public speaking, have helped them already. As one student put it, GEAR UP as a whole and the leadership camp in particular have helped her to “find out who I am as a person—my abilities, what I can do, and how to get past my comfort zone, especially.” Students who had participated in the camp thought that more students should be encouraged to participate in it.

Student and parent expectations have remained high over the last four years; educator expectations remained constant and were considerably lower than student and parent expectations.

- In surveys, most GEAR UP students and parents reported that they expect to complete a 2-year or 4-year college degree or certificate program (86% and 90%, respectively). There were no notable differences over time or across school types.
- In comparison, teachers held lower expectations for their students, reporting that approximately 45% of students will complete a college degree or certificate. Anecdotal data suggests that teachers may not necessarily think students are not capable, but rather they think other factors and barriers, such as cost, may prevent them from enrolling in postsecondary education. There was little change from what was reported the previous year, when teachers estimated that 44% of students would enroll in college.

STUDENT, PARENT, AND EDUCATOR EXPECTATIONS (SURVEYS)



- During site visits, educators and staff shared that they do see a positive change among students in terms of their expectations, with more of their students believing that they can go on to college after graduating, compared with years past. "They feel like they can go to college. They have those dreams and aspirations, that, 'I can do it.'" They also noted that they see more students applying themselves to the college search and application process. However, educators also made clear that they still perceive barriers for many of their students, which might be where their lower expectations for their students' postsecondary chances might come from. Barriers included the high financial need among their students, students' immigration status preventing them from being eligible for some types of financial assistance, and families' financial needs requiring students to go into the workforce right after high school, each of which educators and staff may see as largely out of their control or influence.

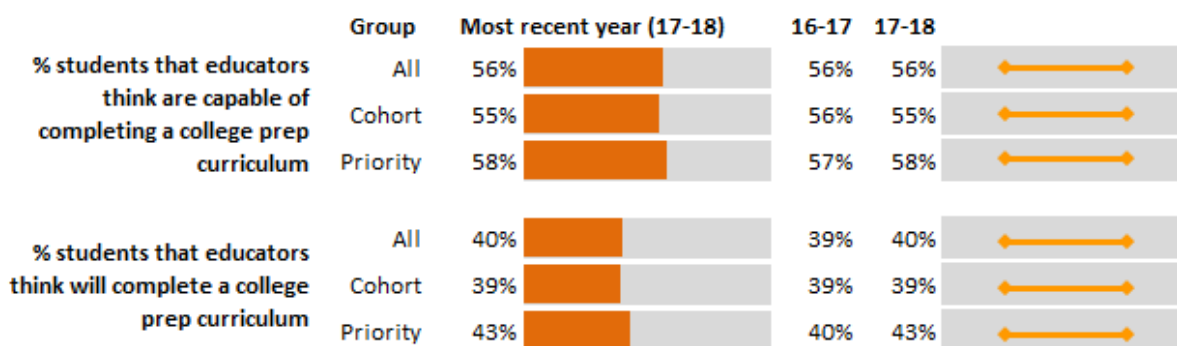
"Overall, these GEAR UP grades are more college- and post high school-oriented than the ones above them [and than those in] previous years. So I do notice that upward trend in terms of awareness."

—GEAR UP Educator

- Yet, it was clear from conversations with students during site visits that they are perceptive of and sensitive to school staff and educators’ expectations of them. All students said there is at least one teacher or staff member (usually a counselor or an ASPIRE mentor) at their school who encourages them, but overall there was room for improvement in how teachers interact with students with regard to supporting their college and career dreams and plans. At two schools, students described that there was a significant portion of their teachers who either “care a lot, only some of the time” or who “[don’t] really care at all.” At one of the schools, students indicated that the reason why teachers don’t care at all is largely because of high staff turnover, which limit teachers’ ability to develop meaningful relationships with the students. Students said that teachers’ perceptions of their chances to succeed beyond high school are contingent on how well they’re doing in that teacher’s class, and if they see the student is involved in other activities, such as athletics. Most students agreed that while teachers were willing to talk with them about college or about their own postsecondary experiences, the onus was on the students to raise the topic.

In Year 4, educators reported that less than two-thirds (56%) of their students are capable of completing a college prep curriculum, and they expect that fewer (40%) will complete it. Educators in priority schools had slightly more favorable opinions.

EDUCATOR EXPECTATIONS ABOUT STUDENTS COMPLETING A COLLEGE PREP CURRICULUM (SURVEYS)



The cost of college continues to be one of the main perceived barriers or concerns that may prevent students from pursuing their postsecondary education goals. Top reasons why students may not continue their education are presented in the following table.

TOP MAIN REASONS STUDENTS MAY NOT CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL (SURVEYS)

REASONS	Students ¹	Parents ¹	Educators
Costs too much	36%	38%	25%
Grades or test scores are not good enough	19%	10%	22%
Plans or needs to work	13%	6%	30%
Student is unmotivated or undecided	5%	15%	21%
Student does not believe they need college for their chosen career	6%	5%	18%

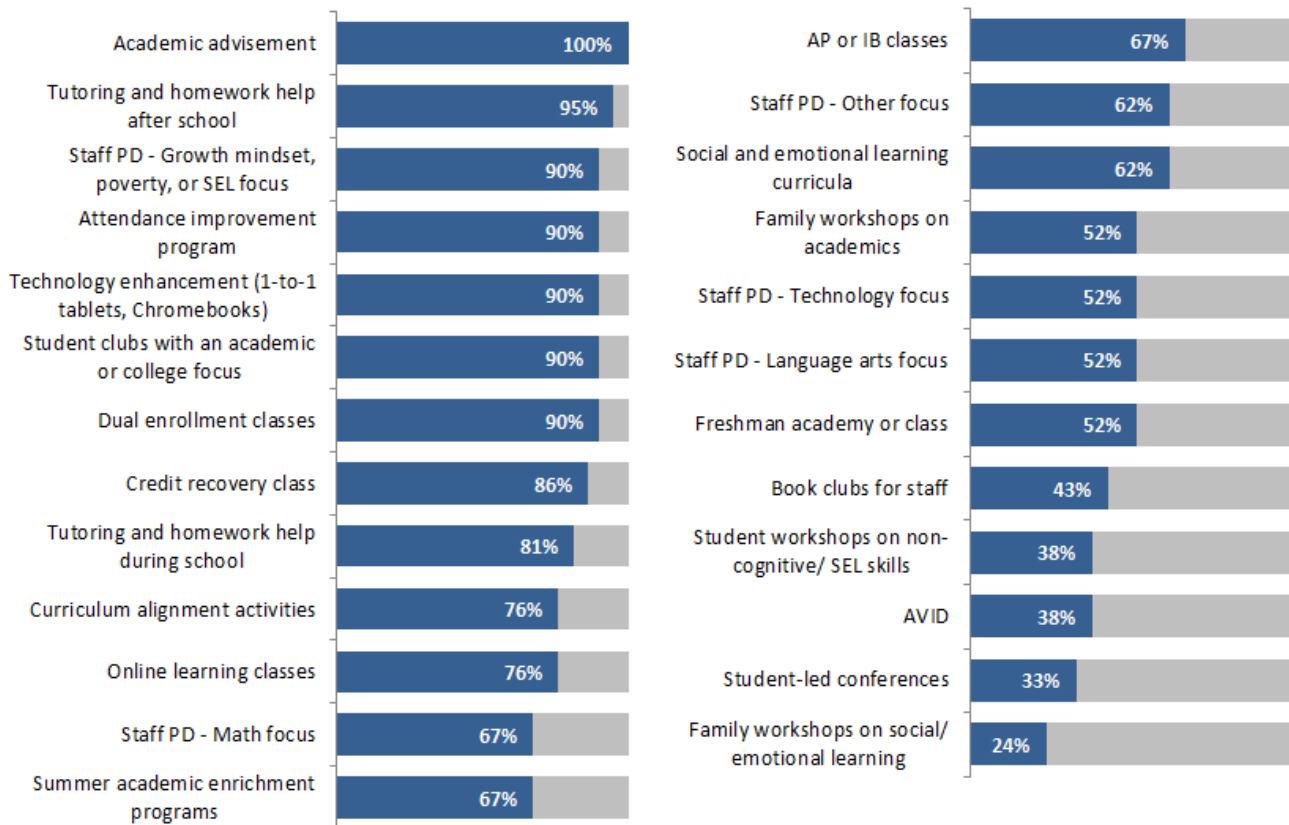
¹Students and parents who selected “N/A” were excluded from these analyses. Responses may not add up to 100% because only the top choices are included in this table.

INCREASING RIGOR AND PREPARING STUDENTS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

GOAL: ACADEMICALLY PREPARE ALL STUDENTS FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION THROUGH RIGOROUS CURRICULUM AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT.

GEAR UP has played an important role in helping schools increase the rigor of instruction and provide the academic and social emotional supports that students need to succeed in school. In 2017–18, GEAR UP schools offered a wide range of services and activities to prepare students for academic success. The most frequent of these—used by at least 90% of GEAR UP clusters—were academic advisement (100%), tutoring and homework help (95%), staff professional development on growth mindset (90%), attendance improvement programs (90%), technology enhancement (90%), student clubs with an academic or college focus (90%), and dual enrollment classes (90%).

RIGOR: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)

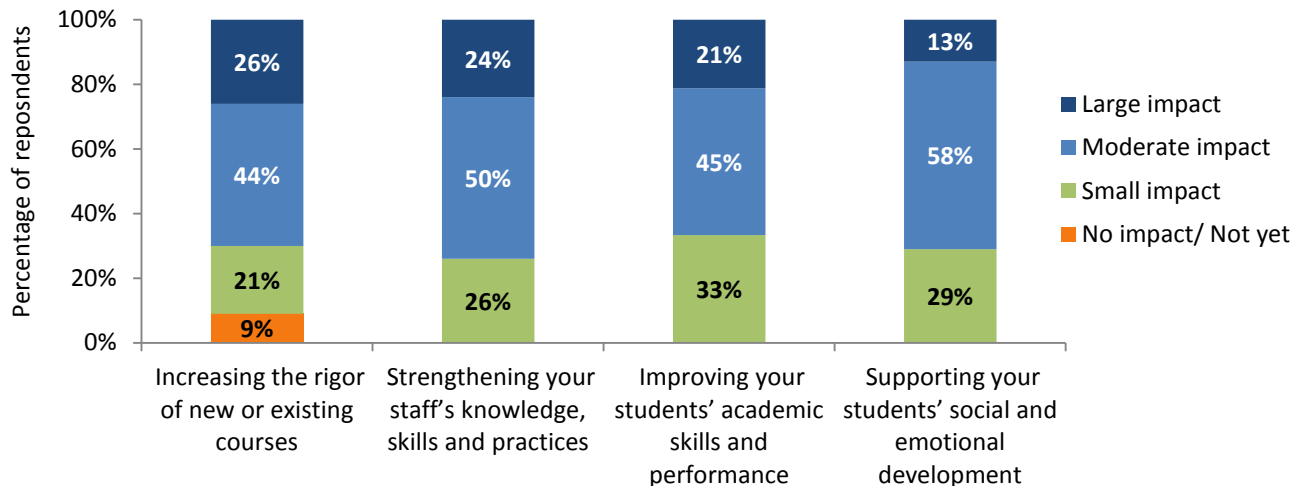


Compared with last year, more schools instituted an attendance improvement program (from 76% of schools in 2016–17 to 90% in 2017–18) and more undertook curriculum alignment activities (from 62% to 76%).

Two-thirds of GEAR UP coordinators and administrators say GEAR UP has had a *large or moderate impact on increasing rigor and preparing students for academic success*. In all four areas—supporting students’ social and emotional development; strengthening staff’s knowledge, skills, and practices; increasing the rigor of new or existing courses; and improving students’ academic skills and performance—between 71% and 66% of coordinators and administrators saw a *large or moderate impact*.



IMPACT OF GEAR UP ON RIGOR (COORDINATOR/ADMIN SURVEYS)



While the percentage of coordinators and administrators indicating a *large* or *moderate impact* went slightly down across each area from the 2016–17 school year, the percent saying there was a *large impact* increased in three of the four areas rated. In addition, there were significant differences in responses for cohort and priority schools in some areas. Whereas 78% of coordinators and administrators at cohort schools said GEAR UP had a *large* or *moderate impact* on strengthening staff, 57% at priority schools said the same; conversely, 86% of priority schools reported a *large* or *moderate impact* on increasing course rigor, compared to 67% of cohort schools.

In 2017–18, schools worked to improve and increase GEAR UP-funded activities and supports to help increase the rigor of instruction and help students in their schoolwork, and students and staff noted many changes and efforts that have been successful.

- Students across all schools we visited mentioned how grateful they were for increased **in-school and afterschool tutoring opportunities**, across various subjects and including test preparation. At one school, where the administration has restructured the class schedule to provide a longer afterschool period once per week for tutoring, students said this “teacher access” was critical to their success. By allowing for more one-on-one time with teachers, tutoring was helping students improve their grades and do better on exams. At another school, the principal listed all the new tutoring programs he was able to implement within the last year, including a study hall for students that enabled them to remain eligible for athletics and other clubs, a Saturday SAT prep course, and afterschool AP test prep. Furthermore, all the opportunities were inspiring students to take their own initiative, according to teachers: “I had a group of freshmen that just decided to do extra work for AP class that they didn't have to do, they just did it on their own after school. Other students saw it, and decided they needed to be doing that, too.”
- School administrators noted that GEAR UP funds have allowed them to increase their **AP course offerings**. One assistant principal celebrated how GEAR UP has “set the foundation for everything,” including expanding their AP courses and the grades they offer them to. Schools also offer afterschool support for students taking these courses. Students were also glad for AP courses, which they find challenging. At one school, students wished they had more AP course offerings, and that courses were available to more grade levels.

“[Students are] starting to think, ‘what more can I do?’ rather than just [trying to meet] the requirements at the baseline.”

—GEAR UP Educator

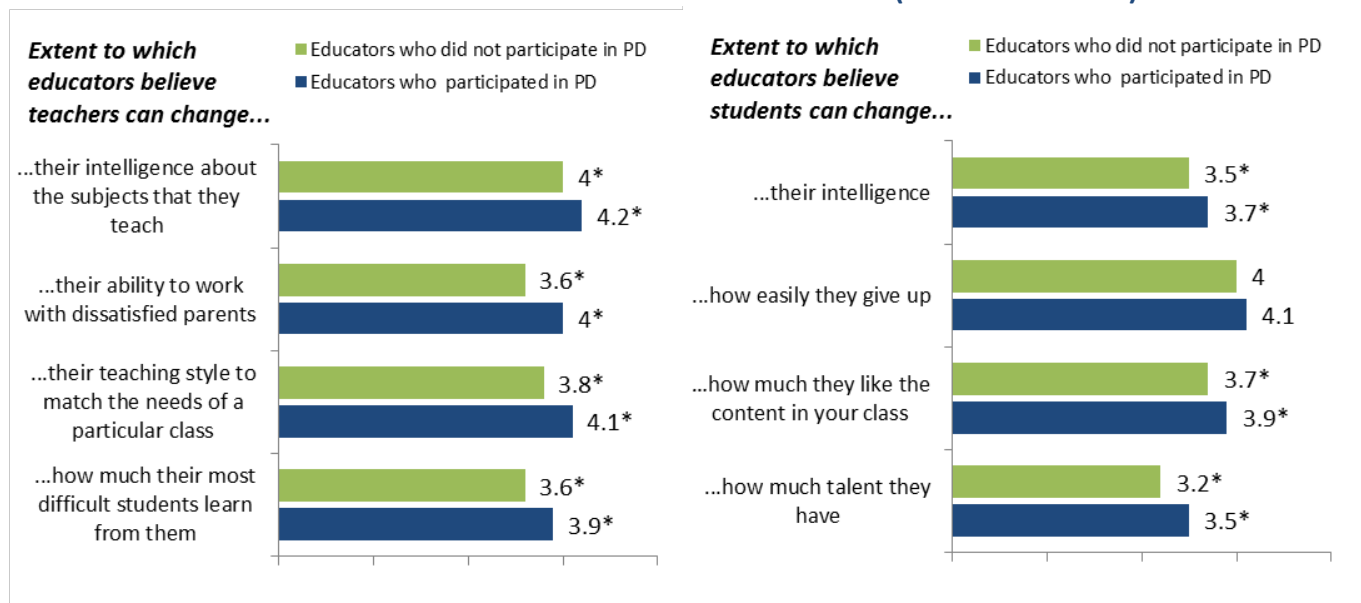


- Schools are also continuing to offer **dual enrollment classes**. At one school, many students shared that they had taken multiple dual enrollment courses, which they find very helpful and which will give them a head start on credits when they start college. At another school students felt similarly, but also wished that there were more classes and that the classes would be available to more grade levels.
- Although only about 40% of GEAR UP schools are implementing **AVID**, in those schools, principals, coordinators, teachers, and students often highlighted it as a particular success. As one principal said, “AVID has a huge college and career readiness piece that ties in well with GEAR UP goals, especially the rigor aspect.” At another school, the GEAR UP coordinator shared that their school has “been able to not just start having AVID electives, but really do a great job with them, with GEAR UP supporting that piece financially.” Students in AVID get the benefits of classes “that you were never really able to take [before],” and teachers see how it has benefitted them: “they are a lot more organized.”

Additional results suggest that GEAR UP-sponsored professional development has resulted in growth mindset gains among educators. Educators who were trained in this reported greater use of growth mindset strategies in their classrooms and showed more positive growth mindset attitudes.

- In the annual surveys, almost half (45%) of educators indicated having participated in GEAR UP-sponsored growth mindset training in 2017–18. Among educators who were trained, 89% said they were *very familiar* or *familiar* with growth mindset strategies, compared to 67% of educators who had not been trained. Furthermore, 75% of trained educators were in the initial stages of implementation or fully implementing already, compared to 48% of educators who did not receive training that year.
- Surveyed educators who were trained exhibited more positive attitudes and perceptions related to their own and their students’ ability to change, learn, and grow than educators who did not receive the training. Almost all differences were statistically significant and of a moderate magnitude. While the two groups were not matched on any *a priori* characteristics, these results are promising.

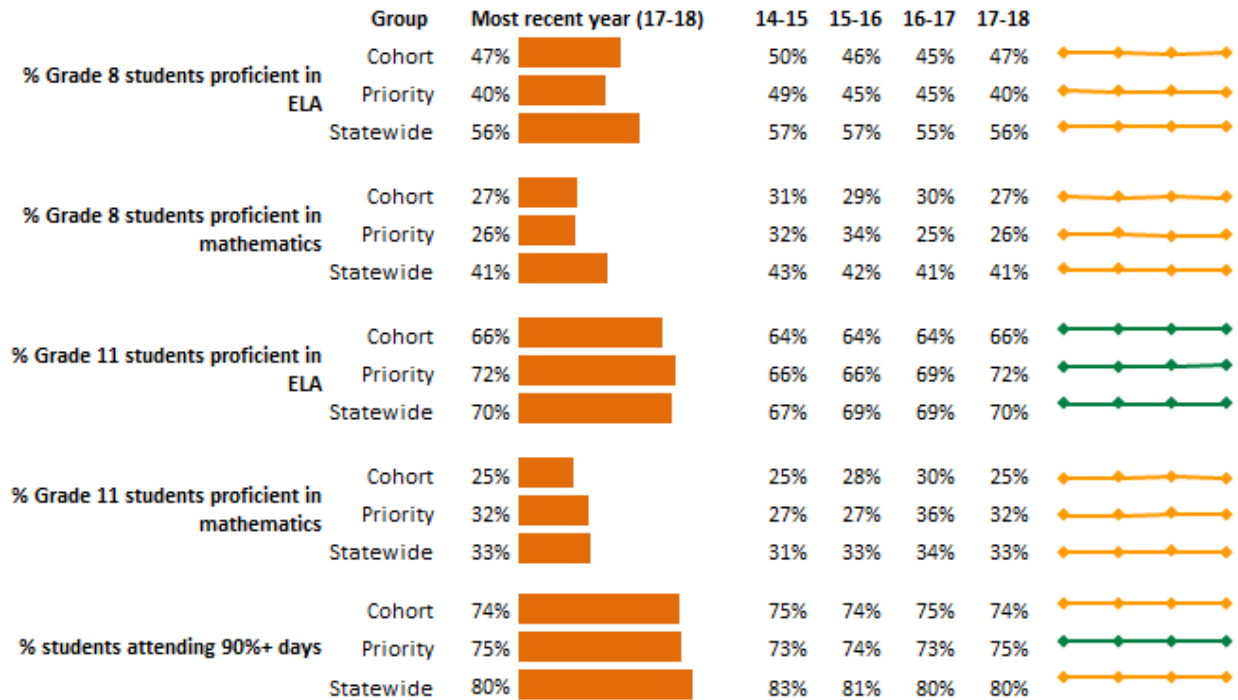
EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS AROUND GROWTH MINDSET (EDUCATOR SURVEYS)



*An asterisk denotes a statistically significant difference at the .05 level.

Academic underperformance remains a common challenge in most schools, particularly in math. In 2017–18, less than a third of 8th-grade students and 11th-grade students in GEAR UP schools were proficient in math, compared to 41% of students in these grades statewide. Close to a fourth of the students in GEAR UP had an average daily attendance lower than 90%, a critical threshold that is strongly correlated with school success, therefore indicating that this continues to be an area for growth.

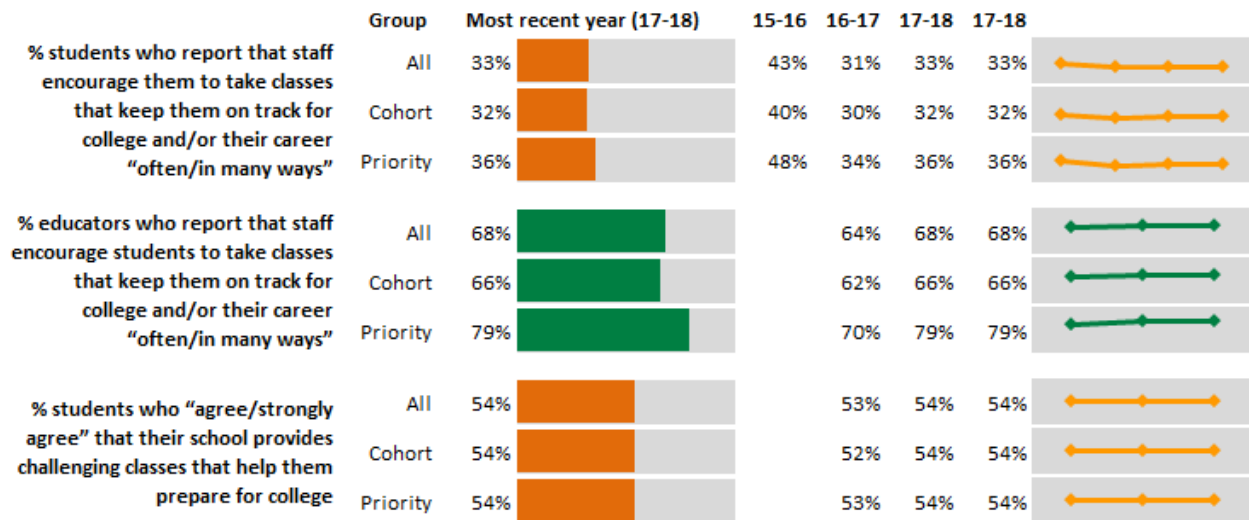
STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND ATTENDANCE (ODE DATA)



During site visits, principals and staff were both aware and candid about their need to continue to focus on improving academic rigor and increasing test scores. One principal noted that they have used this survey and test score data to structure their approach next year, including offering more support for testing. Another administrator noted that they also plan to focus on rigor next year by adding more AP classes as options for students, as well as by adjusting their model for math instruction in both their middle school and high school, in order to improve those test scores.

Survey findings also show that only a third of students think that staff encourage them to take classes that keep them on track for college "often" (compared to over two-thirds of educators) and just over half believe that the schools provides challenging classes. The percentage of educators who report that staff encourage students to take classes that keep them on track increased to a small extent over the last two years. It should be noted that educators, in general, were more positive than students in several areas assessed in the surveys.

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS AROUND RIGOR (SURVEYS)



These findings were better understood after conversations with students during the site visits. At one school, where students were asked to reflect on the survey data, students explained that they felt that the “challenging classes” at their school were the AP classes, and—as mentioned earlier on this report—they did not feel there were enough AP classes offered. In terms of students perceiving encouragement by staff to take classes that keep them on track for college, students at another school explained that they felt like they had very limited course options. Some students mentioned that, for example at their school, if you want an honors diploma, “you’re kind of forced to [take specific] classes to get to that diploma. There just isn’t a broad variety of classes that you can take.” In terms of classes to get them on track for a career, students across all schools said they would like more career-focused classes. Thus it is possible that students don’t feel encouraged to take courses to keep them on track “often” because in their eyes there aren’t many options for classes in that category.

Educators want to make sure that students realize the importance of academic success in high school as it relates to their college plans and aspirations. Students want more course offerings and choices to help keep them motivated. As one school administrator shared, “we’re looking at creating a culture of academics in our school, [which in turn] is supporting that college culture as well.” They said that if the school can help students understand the importance of their academic performance now, “we can tie the student buy-in [that they already have for GEAR UP] to their classes, then hopefully that will transfer into their high school performance.” Students, on the other hand, don’t seem unaware of the importance of their performance in their classes, but they expressed that the lack of choices in courses (explained above) could leave them feeling unmotivated.

“The goal of GEAR UP is to get us to go to college, and learn that it’s not a dream, it’s a plan.”

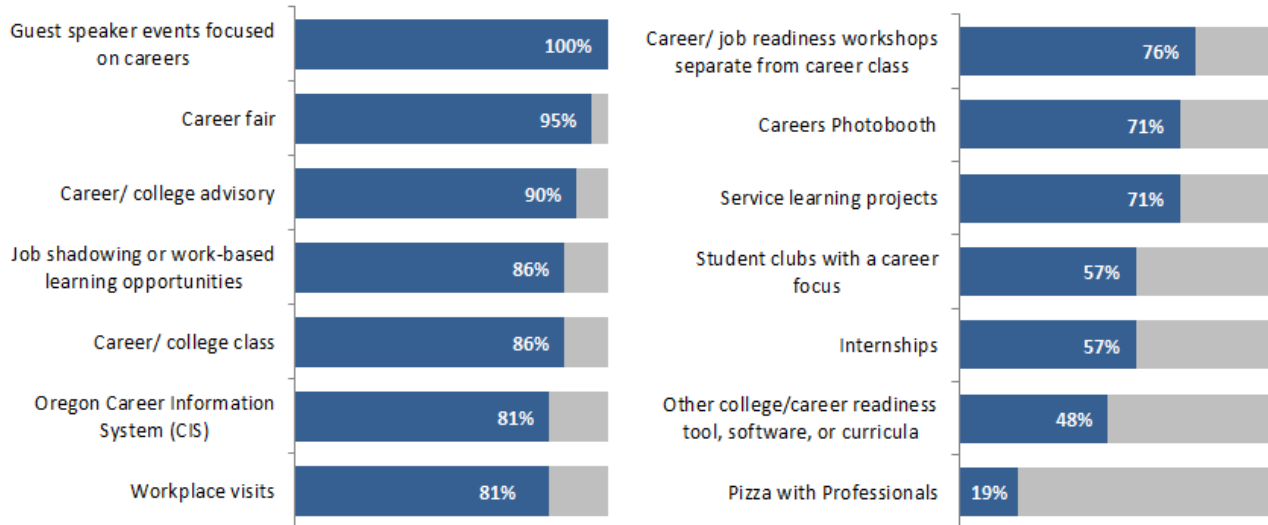
—GEAR UP Student

PROMOTING RELEVANCE AND CAREER AWARENESS

GOAL: LINK STUDENTS' CAREER ASPIRATIONS WITH THEIR EDUCATIONAL GOALS.

In 2017–18, half or more GEAR UP schools offered a variety of activities and interventions to help students learn about careers, develop career goals, and better understand the educational pathways towards these careers. The most frequent types of activities reported by schools were guest speaker events focused on careers (100%), career fairs (95%), career/college advisories (90%), job shadowing or work-based learning opportunities (86%), and career/ college classes (86%).

RELEVANCE: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



Notably, 71% of schools offered service learning projects this year, up from 57% of schools in 2016–17, and 71% also held Careers Photobooth events, up from 38%.

Almost all GEAR UP coordinators and administrators responded in surveys that they believe GEAR UP has improved the relevance of their school by connecting students' career aspirations to their postsecondary educational goals. Fifty-six percent said GEAR UP has had a *moderate impact* in this area and 35% said it has had a *large impact*. Compared with the 2016–17 school year, fewer coordinators and administrators saw a *large impact* (down to 35% from 50% in 2016–17) and more saw a *moderate impact* (up from 45% to 56%).

Career fairs and the lunch with professionals events were identified as effective and helpful activities: students said these events helped them understand various college paths, and staff and parents saw how those events got students energized and looking forward to an “end goal.”

- At two of the schools we visited, staff and students agreed that **career fairs** have been motivating and exciting for students. This was especially the case when there was a wide variety of careers represented at the fair (including careers that are not available locally), when students get to have a voice in selecting the speakers, and/or when students can have meaningful conversations with and the chance to ask questions of the presenters. One school that sees these events as successful has decided to hold two per year. A teacher at another school commented that their school career fair was particularly successful this year because they had “a lot of jobs that the kids weren’t used to seeing,” especially trade jobs. Students across all three schools shared that career fairs were motivating, inspiring, and helped them to narrow down their college choices.

- Lunch with professionals** was also identified as a successful activity, and students especially noted that it helped them get a more in-depth exposure to and understanding of careers. At one school, every student we spoke to had attended a lunch. They shared that it helped them to learn about the speakers' careers in-depth and the "ins and outs" of daily experiences of those careers. Students also appreciated learning about the presenters' personal paths to their careers (such as one speaker who began his career as a plumber in the military) because it gave them a better sense of what paths they might follow for themselves. Educators also appreciated this aspect of these events, specifically as it related to getting students more focused on and interested in the various steps in their high school educational paths that they need to follow.
- School administrators and educators also highlighted **workplace visits and career-focused trips**. One school administrator shared that they took students on a field trip to visit a Coast Guard station, during which they got to sit in a helicopter and take turns driving a boat. They reflected that GEAR UP has been successful in providing students "with glimpses into other futures they could have for themselves."

"[The Career Fair] was probably one of the best ways to learn about both college and jobs. I got to go to the things I wanted to learn about, there were many different jobs, and you got to ask specific questions."

—GEAR UP Student

"I think that the lunch with professionals has been very successful. It's gotten students talking about different avenues, and gets them excited. Then that lets us be like, 'Okay, let's talk about the steps that we have to take to get you there.' [Because they're excited], the steps have more meaning."

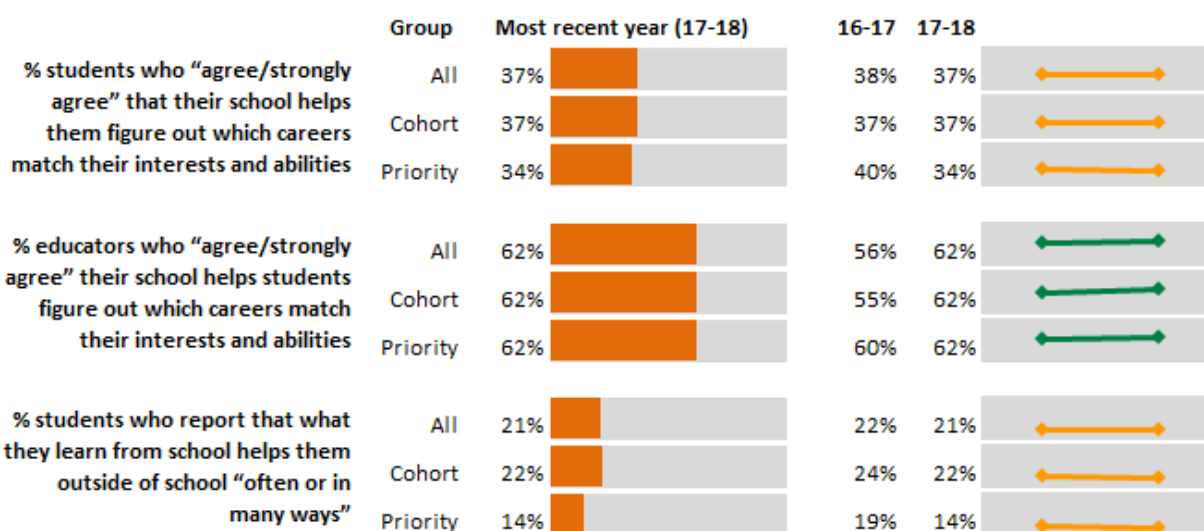
—GEAR UP Educator

Notwithstanding these successful activities, evaluation results

continue to indicate that schools could do more to make learning relevant for students.

- In surveys, only slightly over one-third of students think their school helps them figure out which careers match their interests and abilities, and very few students indicate that what they learn in school helps them outside of school *often or in many ways*. As noted earlier, educators offered more positive responses than students in many of the areas assessed in the survey, including their school's efforts in fostering career congruence.

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS AROUND RELEVANCE (SURVEYS)



- During one site visit, when students were presented with these survey results and asked to reflect on the results, it became clear that students saw a few gaps in their school’s efforts and offerings to promote relevance, and indicated that there might be a need to better connect the options that do exist.
- In terms of gaps, students at all three schools said they would appreciate having more courses—or having at least some—that are oriented toward specific careers, such as culinary arts or counseling/social work. It was clear that students thought that these offerings would not only help them learn more about career fields that they are interested in, but would also make them feel more motivated and excited about school in general. Some administrators shared with us that they had worked to improve and expand their career and technical education (CTE) programs and course offerings, yet in another school students said they would appreciate a wider selection of these types of courses. Students also reported being interested in online courses, although they mentioned that they are not encouraged to seek out these courses because of the burden registration places on guidance counselors.
- In terms of the need to make clearer or more defined connections among the options that schools are already offering, students shared that while the Oregon Career Information System (CIS) or other career-focused activities helped them identify potential career paths, the activities were ultimately not useful if they didn’t have additional opportunities to explore these careers. As one student said, “if you really like film, and all these tests are telling you, you like film, but you don't have a film class or something where you can start learning those things early on or to start developing those skills—then it’s a little more difficult.” Students also expressed that they didn’t always see opportunities to connect their career interests to any college exploration activities. For example, some students explained that they felt a disconnect between their career assessment results and tours of colleges that specialized in unrelated majors or disciplines. Finally, some students also said they felt that the CIS or other career tools were dated and missing many of the “up and coming” or “cutting edge” careers and jobs.

“If [GEAR UP] would do more research into finding what new jobs are coming in, and what skill sets are required for those, and incorporate that into the curriculum [for us to explore and see if we connect with], I think that would definitely help a lot of students.”

–GEAR UP Student

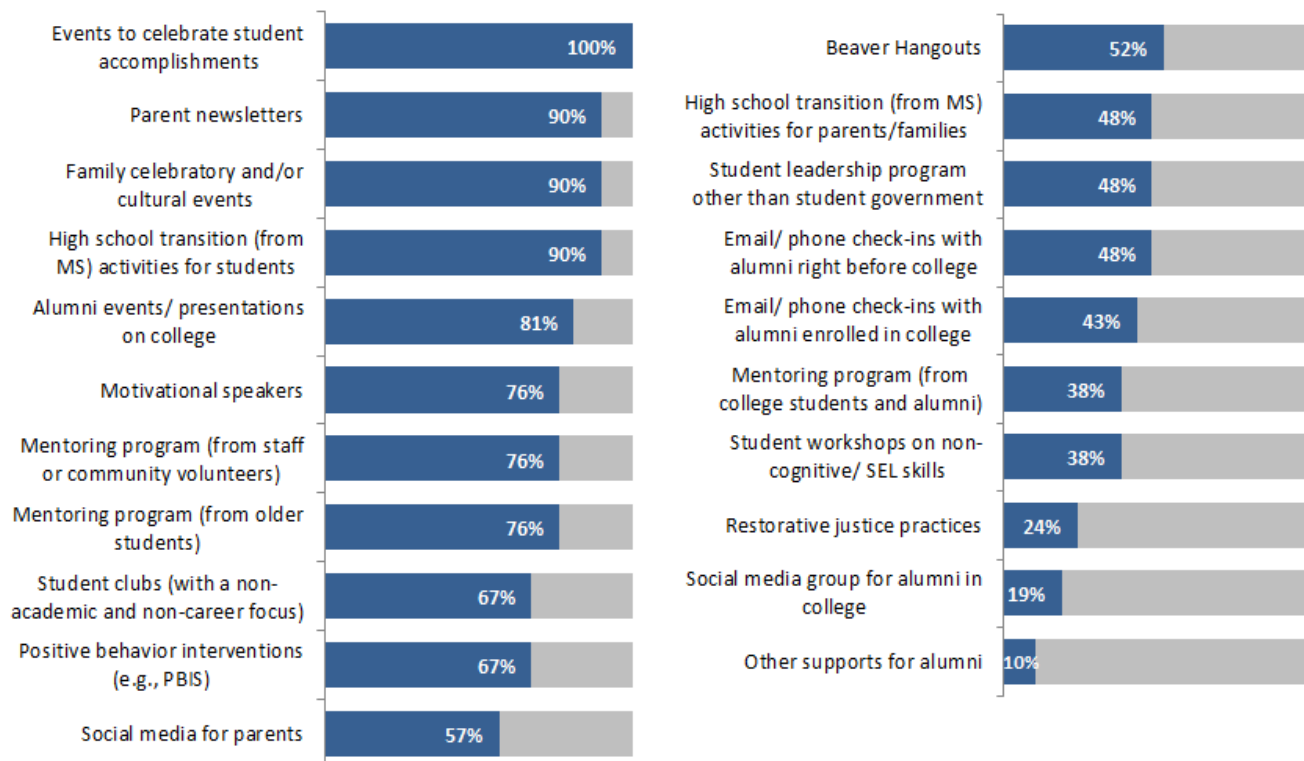


FOSTERING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

GOAL: FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS THAT ENCOURAGE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS.

In 2017–18, GEAR UP schools implemented as many as 18 strategies and interventions to foster positive learning environments and supportive relationships. The most frequent types of activities and strategies—used by at least 90% of GEAR UP schools—were events to celebrate student accomplishments (100%), parent newsletters, family celebratory and/or cultural events, and high school transition activities for students (each 90%).

RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



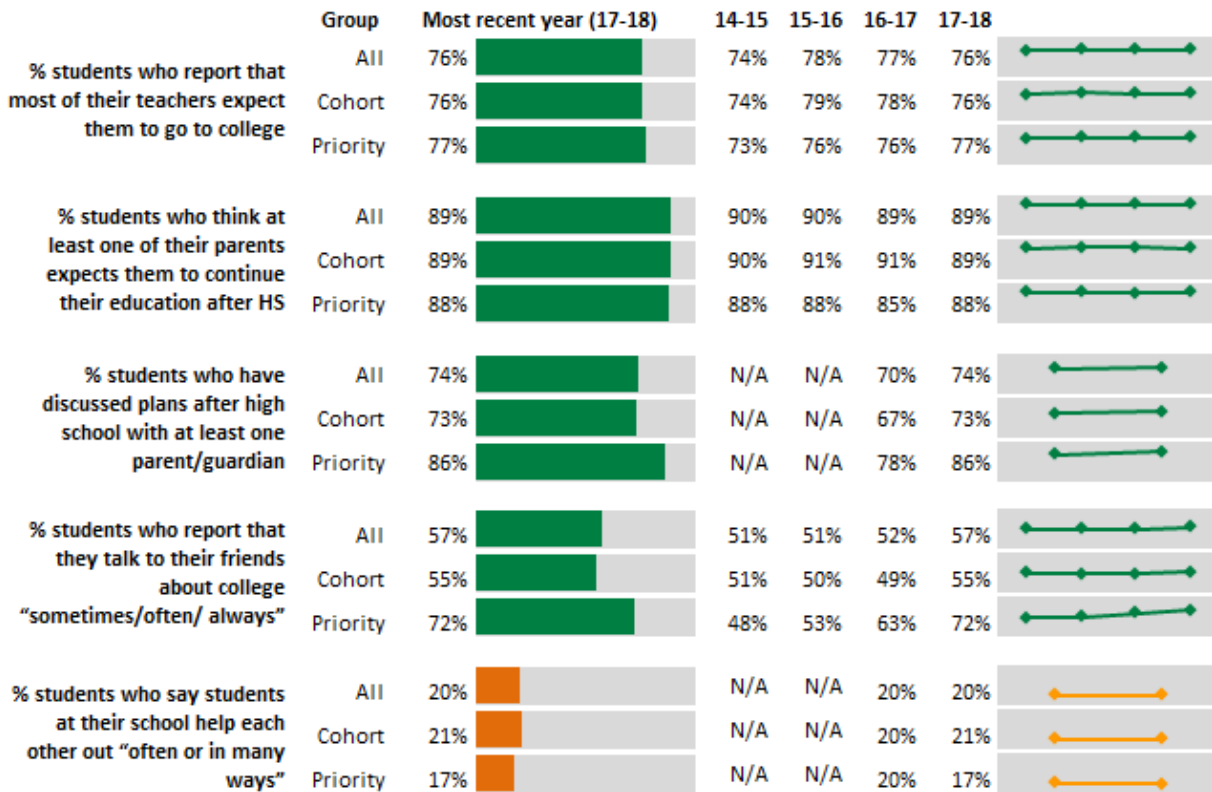
Family celebratory and/or cultural events were much more common this year; they were held by 90% of schools compared with 52% in the 2016–17 school year.

Consistent with previous years' findings, there is agreement among educators, students, and parents that, overall, schools provide a welcoming environment where students can develop nurturing relationships with adults and peers. Educator involvement in college and career readiness has remained constant over the past few years.

- Students indicate that most of their teachers and their parents have high expectations for them. More students are talking to their parents about life after high school plans.
- Students are talking more to their friends about college, particularly in priority schools where students are in the older grades. However, few of them think that students help each other out.

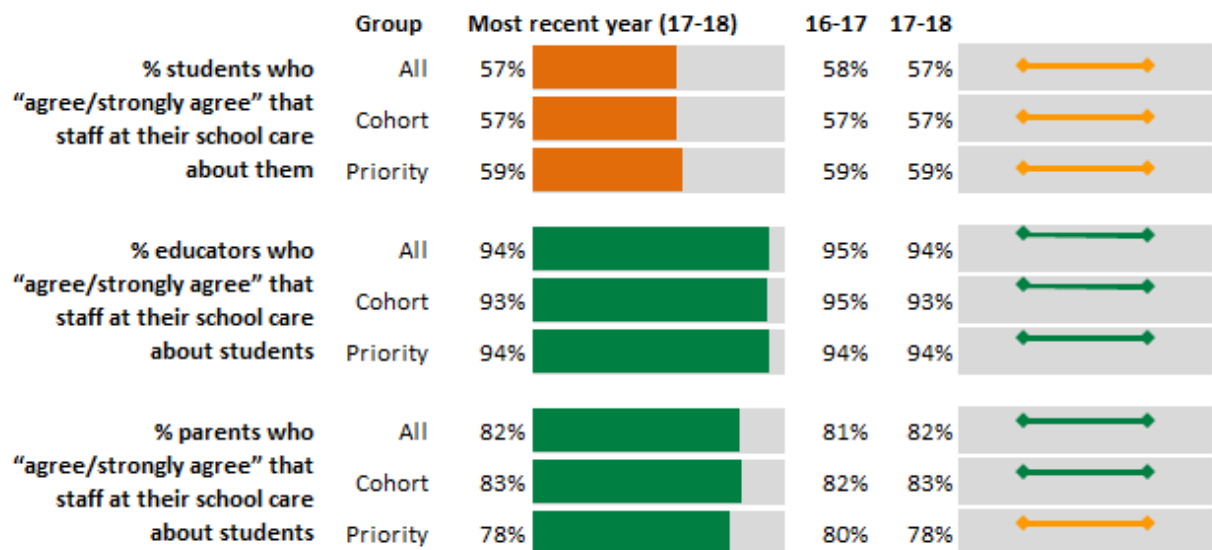


STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS (SURVEYS)



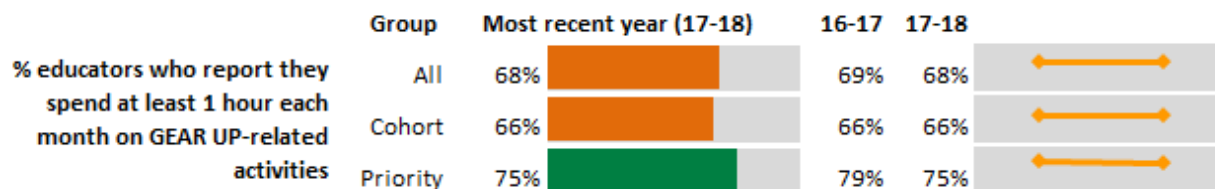
- Educators and parents are more positive than students about the extent to which staff at their school cares about students.

PERCEPTIONS ON SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATORS (SURVEYS)



- Most educators are involved in college and career readiness to some extent. Priority schools showed greatest involvement than cohort schools, probably due to their longer GEAR UP exposure.

EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT IN COLLEGE/CAREER READINESS (SURVEYS)



- These results were consistent with findings from the site visits. In speaking with students, it was clear that almost all students feel positively about supportive relationships they have with some staff, and at the same time feel there are some staff who could demonstrate more care. At all three schools, students said they have at least one person that they know they can go to with any college and career questions, and it was clear that this level of help and engagement from school staff and educators was valuable and affirming to them. In one school, all students we interviewed named the same person—the leader of their ASPIRE Career Center—as their go-to person; and in another school, most students also answered the same person, a teacher who was very knowledgeable about scholarships. Students said about this teacher, “if she doesn't know the information that you need, she'll go out of her way to find it out for you.” Students also spoke positively of their school counselors: “they help a lot. They help more than teachers.” One school principal specifically mentioned that an important benefit of GEAR UP is that it has “re-energized our counselors,” and one counselor also spoke of being “re-energized,” which appears is having a positive impact on relationships with students. Administrators and coordinators said they felt that the majority of staff members have bought in to GEAR UP, and were supportive of the activities and of the students (see implementation challenges and improvements section later in this report). However, students also indicated that there was room for improvement in how teachers interact with students, and the extent to which teachers demonstrate their interest, care, and support, as discussed earlier in this report.
- “I think the impact that I see is these students who may not have college on their brain, necessarily, they kind of light up when we tell them, ‘Oh, would you like to have lunch with a teacher to talk about college?’ And the student would just gasp, ‘Really? Oh my goodness, yeah.’ It’s that engagement that maybe wouldn’t have been there before, I think is really kind of an exciting thing.”*

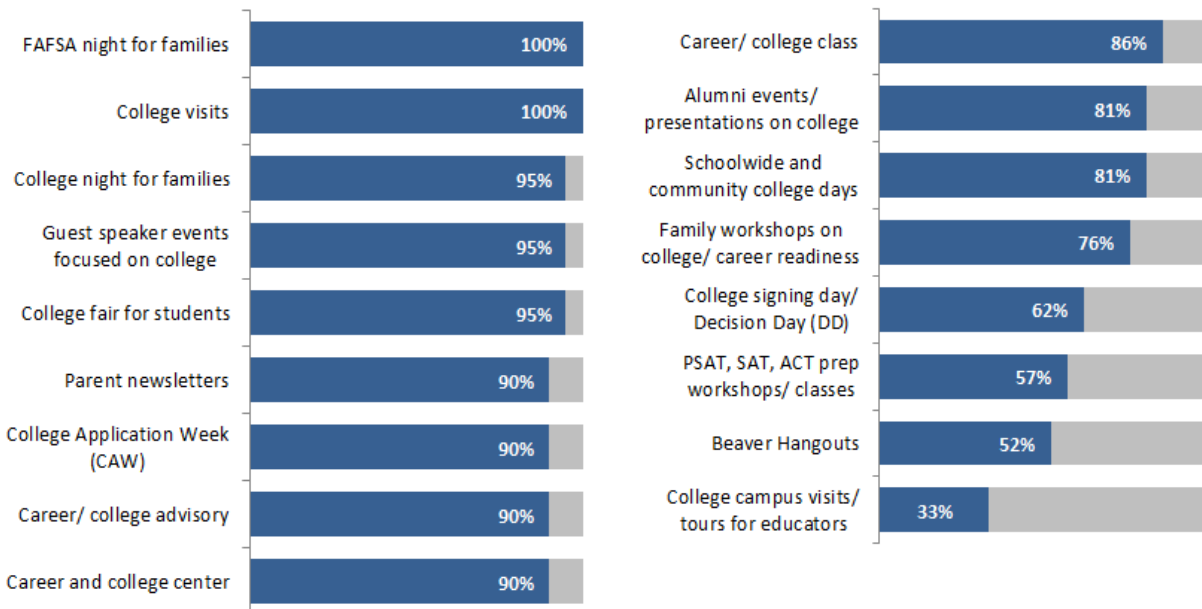
—GEAR UP Staff
- In addition to relationships being developed within the schools, administrators and staff discussed the strength of their school’s relationships with the students’ parents/guardians and families, and the broader community. Most administrators and staff felt that their school communities are one of the greatest assets to the larger community. One school has created a staff position to help to students who are experiencing homelessness, to support them in getting any additional services they may need. Staff at another school, which serves many students and families affected by poverty but also some wealthier and more educated families, said there is an “incredible culture” of giving among groups and individuals in their community; an anonymous donor gives thousands of dollars every semester to cover food costs for students. A staff member at another school also reflected on how they have created a welcoming environment for parents. They have had success because of a focus on developing personal relationships, and furthering those not just in school the school building, but also out in the community—at church or at the grocery store—wherever they see parents.

RAISING AWARENESS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION OPTIONS, AND THE APPLICATION AND FINANCING PROCESS

**GOAL: PROMOTE EARLY AWARENESS OF COLLEGE PREPARATION, SELECTION, ADMISSIONS,
AND FINANCIAL AID.**

In 2017–18, there were nine activities designed to increase students’ and families’ knowledge of and preparation for postsecondary education that were offered by at least 90% of GEAR UP schools. The most frequent types of activities and strategies were FAFSA night (100%), college visits (100%), college night for families (95%), guest speaker events focused on college (95%), and college fairs for students (95%).

RAISING AWARENESS: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



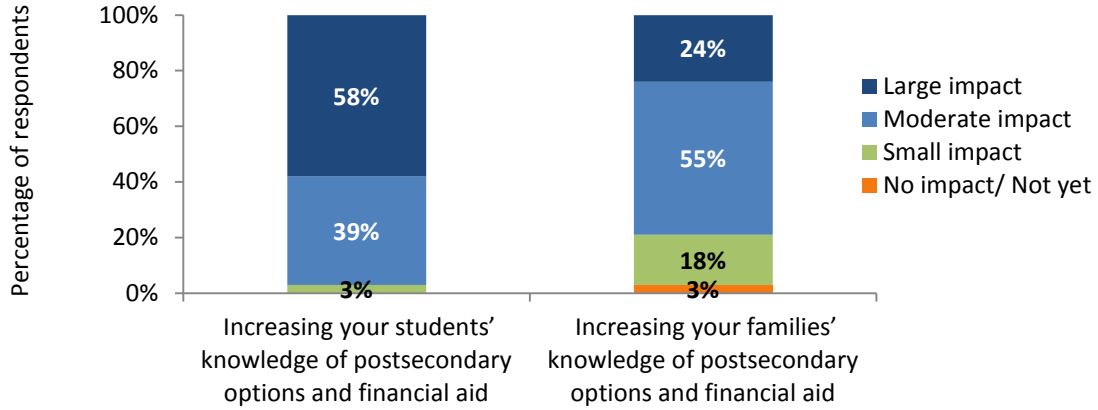
More schools reported implementing College Application Week (CAW) this year compared to the previous year (90% and 76%, respectively).

GEAR UP continues to have a large and important impact on raising awareness of postsecondary education options and financing.

- Almost all coordinators and administrators we surveyed (97%) said that GEAR UP had a *large* or *moderate* impact on raising students’ awareness this year, including 58% who said it had a *large* impact. Most respondents also indicated that GEAR UP has had a *moderate* or *large* impact on increasing families’ knowledge of postsecondary options and financial aid.
- There were large differences between what cohort schools and priority schools reported. Specifically, a much higher proportion of priority schools than cohort schools said GEAR UP had a *large* impact on increasing students’ knowledge of postsecondary options and financial aid this year (86% compared to 50%, respectively). Similarly, a higher proportion of priority schools than cohort schools reported a *large* impact of GEAR UP on families’ knowledge (43% compared to 19%). These differences are probably explained in part to the fact that priority schools served students in the older grades (grades 11-12) whereas cohort schools focused on grades 7-10.



IMPACT OF GEAR UP ON RAISING AWARENESS (COORDINATOR/ADMIN SURVEYS)

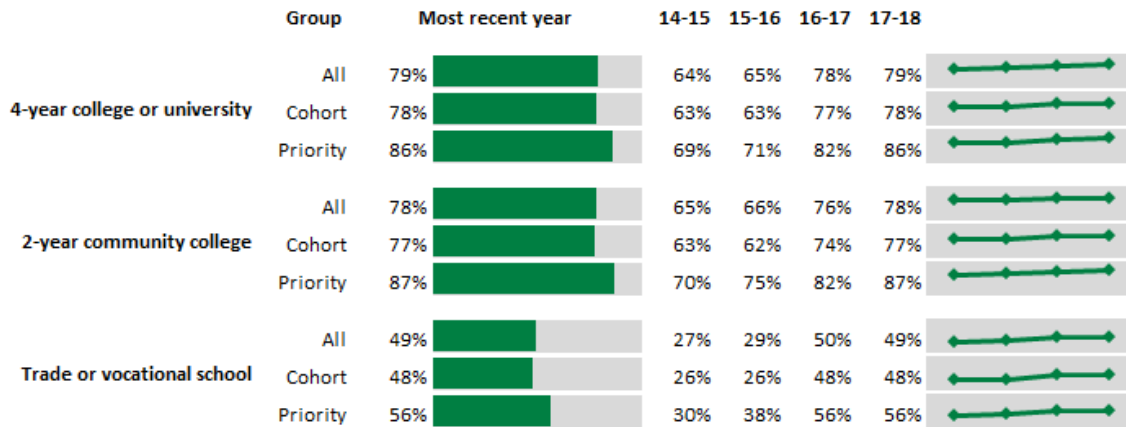


- As noted earlier, **college visits** were singled out as one of the most powerful experiences students are able to have through GEAR UP, one that has positively impacted their awareness of postsecondary education options. Many students in the focus groups talked about being influenced by college visits to apply to more colleges than they had initially planned, or to consider majors that they had never thought of.
- Similarly, students also mentioned that **college fairs** helped them to learn about other college options and to broaden their college interests. At one school, students described how the sophomore class led their own college fair. Each student chose a college in Oregon, researched and developed a presentation about that particular college, contacted college representatives to request brochures, t-shirts, or other “swag” that the students could hand out at their booth, and then presented this information to the other grades, as well as parents/guardians, who attended the fair.
- Schools also found that having **mentors to instruct students about financial aid** and help them apply for scholarships was extremely helpful. At one school, for example, students talked about the benefits of having the ASPIRE mentor work with all seniors to fill out the FAFSA and apply for scholarships.

Students' self-reported knowledge of entrance requirements has increased significantly over time. Most parents still over-estimate the cost of college. Students’ knowledge has increased over the years, although they know less about trade or vocational schools than they do about 2-year and 4-year colleges. There were similar results for parents.

STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF COLLEGE REQUIREMENTS (SURVEYS)

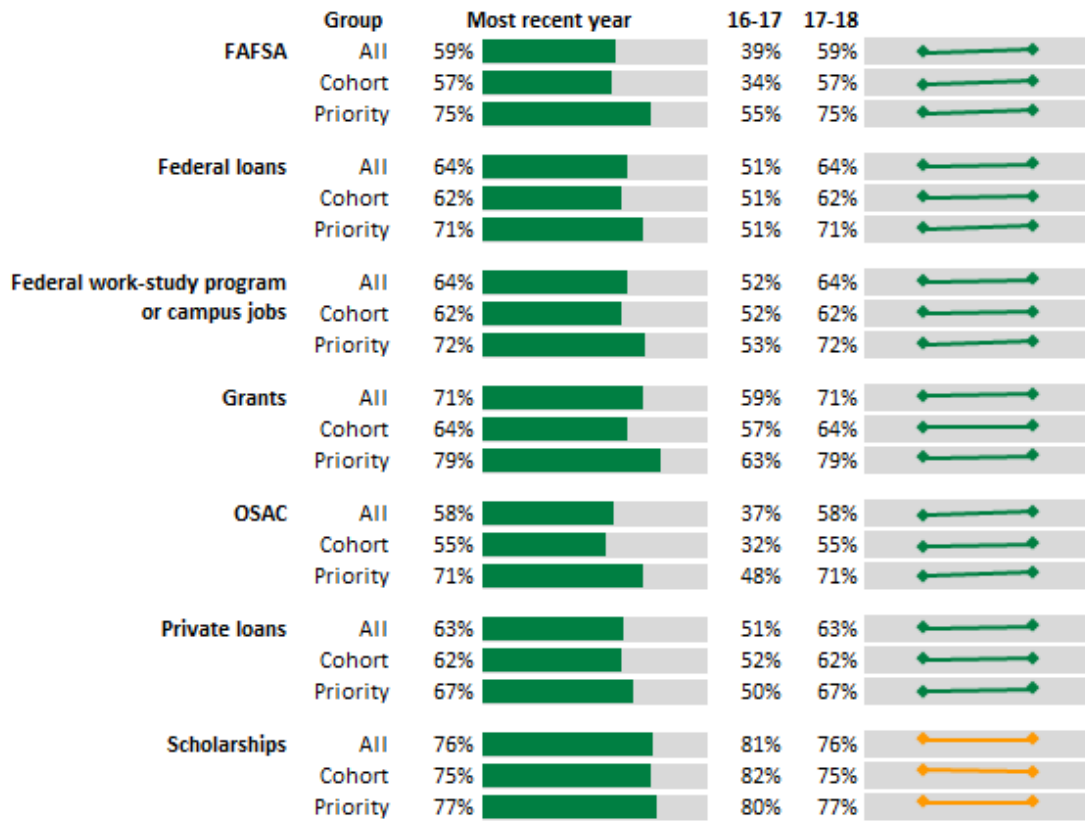
*% of STUDENTS who report they know “all” or “some” requirements to be accepted to...**



- Students' knowledge of resources to help pay for postsecondary education has also increased considerably over the last two years. Students in priority schools reported knowing more than students in cohort schools.

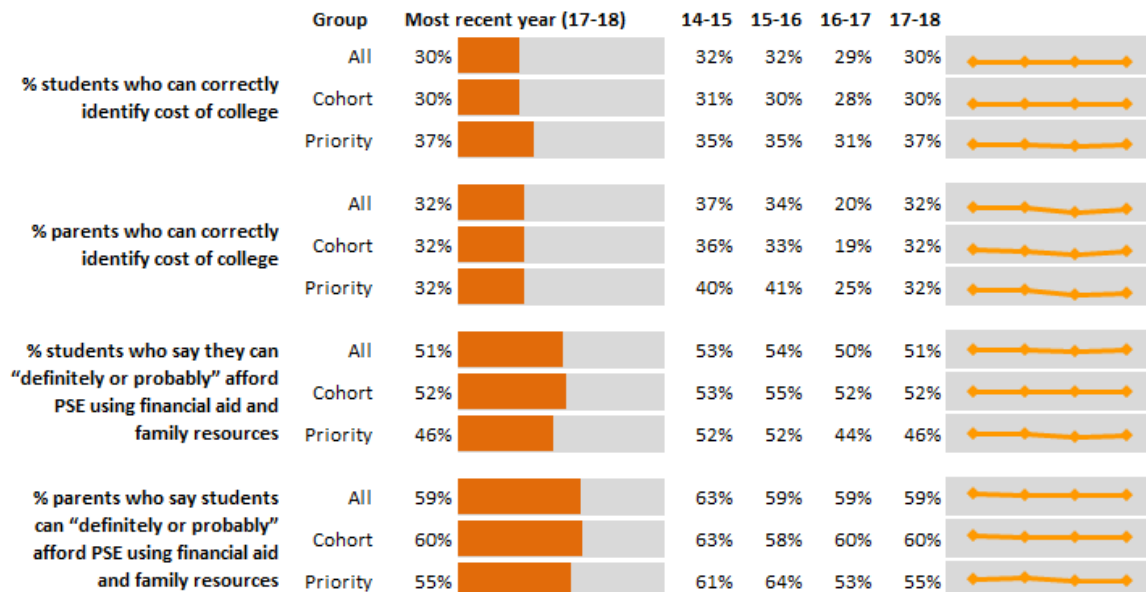
STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF FINANCIAL SOURCES (SURVEYS)

% of STUDENTS who report they know "a little" or "a lot" about...



- However, more than two-thirds of GEAR UP students and parents do not know the actual cost of college, with many of them overestimating the cost. Yet, about half of the students and slightly more than half of the parents think they can afford postsecondary education.

STUDENT AND PARENT PERCEPTIONS ON COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY (SURVEYS)

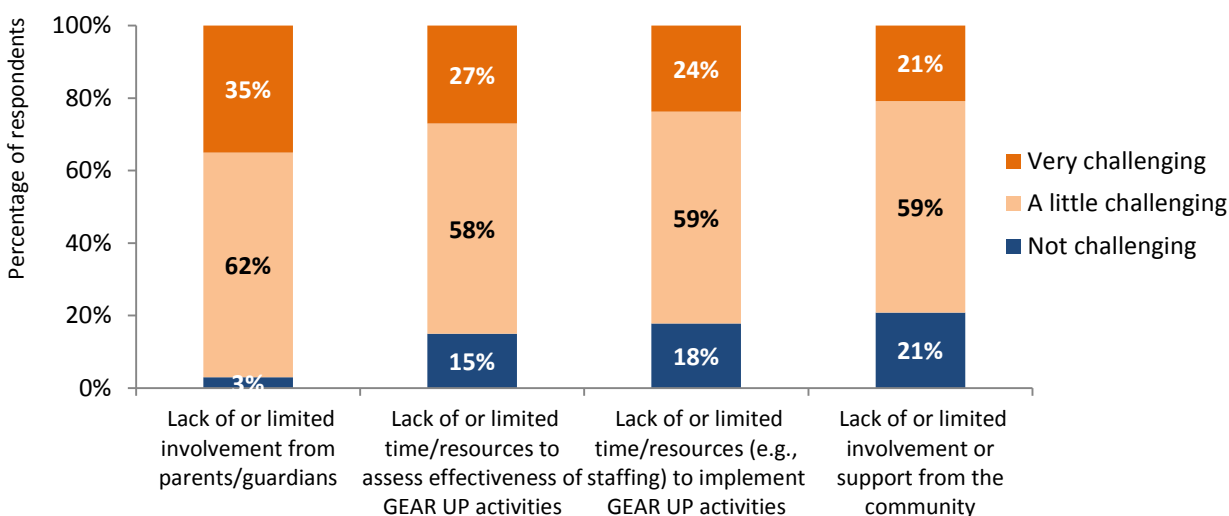


- These results might be due, in part, to the fact that schools continue to struggle with engaging parents/guardians and getting them involved in GEAR UP activities (see more in the next section) where they could improve their knowledge around college affordability. During site visits, parents said that they really appreciated all the information they have been given from GEAR UP events, especially the financial information, which most felt could not come early enough—they appreciate having this early in high school or even in middle school. Parents recognized that events were never as well attended as they could be, and suggested that a way to get more information to parents would be to create print guidelines or an information fact sheet that had all the “need to know” information about financial aid, such as deadlines for the process and links to websites or other resources. They also felt it would be helpful if this information was mailed to parents alongside an invitation to a future event where the school staff would be available to discuss the information further. One parent also suggested that this information—especially financial aid deadlines—could be printed on students’ progress reports, again to ensure that the key information reaches a wider audience.
- **During site visits, school staff and parents expressed a desire to see more focus and emphasis in GEAR UP on trade and vocational schools as a viable postsecondary option for their students.** For example, one principal noted that a significant percentage of graduating seniors had gone into a trade program, and wished that his school did a better job at “counting” those students in their postsecondary numbers and celebrating the accomplishments of these students more. Other staff mentioned that the messaging and “branding” of GEAR UP, which uses the word “college” as an umbrella term, is potentially misleading to students and parents. One parent agreed and also shared their perception that some GEAR UP activities, like the college night, only focuses on 2-year and 4-year colleges. Although the parent also agreed that GEAR UP has activities and offerings to help students attend a trade school, but that the messaging about this career path could be improved.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND IMPROVEMENTS

Getting parents, guardians, and the broader community more involved, and not having enough time or resources for implementing activities and assessing their effectiveness, were identified by some schools as challenges their schools face when implementing GEAR UP activities.

CHALLENGES TO GEAR UP IMPLEMENTATION (COORDINATOR/ADMIN SURVEYS)



Most principals, coordinators, administrators, and teachers expressed during interviews that they felt as if they had hit a ceiling when it came to parent/guardian engagement. School staff reported that they have been using a wide range of strategies—such as offering food and other incentives, providing translation, increasing outreach through fliers and home phone calls—but that their programs still face insurmountable barriers with parent/guardian engagement, in part due to the fact that many parents and guardians work multiple jobs or have childcare needs. In addition, one staff member who is a parent herself said that she had heard other parents/guardians say that once they have learned what the program is about and/or they have attended an event, they don't feel the need to keep coming back every year to learn more about it. Administrators and teachers at other schools shared this perception, and wondered how to strike a balance between institutionalizing parent/guardian events to make coordination easier, and keeping events new and exciting year after year.

During visits, schools also shared that while they felt they were doing a successful job with GEAR UP programming as a whole, they still felt challenged by the lack of time to plan, oversee, and implement activities. As one administrator shared, “the main challenge for me is always time,” adding that the school had not been able to offer as many GEAR UP events and activities as he had hoped, especially parent/guardian events. A GEAR UP coordinator said the organization of and timely communication about GEAR UP activities were both challenging, since they are a large school, with “many moving parts,” and staff who are pulled in many different directions. Another administrator agreed, adding that communication and coordination between their town's middle school and high school about their GEAR UP programming was difficult.

Notably, many GEAR UP coordinators and administrators reported that staff buy-in has improved. Compared with 2016–17, when 29% of GEAR UP coordinators said lack of staff buy-in was *very challenging* (and another 52% reporting it was *a little challenging*), this year only 9% of coordinators and administrators said it was *very challenging* (and 59% said it was *a little challenging*).

These improvements were consistent with what we heard from principals, GEAR UP coordinators, and other staff during site visits. For example, a principal indicated that “mostly everyone has bought into the [GEAR UP] model.” He also explained that their school's use of AVID has helped tremendously to get teachers to understand and talk about the college and career focus of GEAR UP; both initiatives complement each other well and are directly aligned to school-wide goals. An assistant principal at another school also commented that “staff are completely bought in, because they're seeing the benefits right in their classrooms, and then the opportunities to get out of their classrooms on trips.” While schools still acknowledged some challenges—such as needing to convince teachers to allow students to miss class for various GEAR UP trips and activities, or figuring out incentives to get teachers to volunteer at events or fill out evaluation surveys—overall it seems that buy-in was much less of a challenge compared with last year.

“We have a lot of people invested in the kids, in wanting to help. Which I think is such an asset to us, and to this program, that it's not just one person doing everything.”

—GEAR UP Coordinator



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through GEAR UP, schools are implementing a wide range of college, career, academic, social and emotional, and family engagement activities designed to prepare students for success in school, postsecondary education and careers. Overall, evaluation findings for Year 4 of the grant indicate that GEAR UP schools are making steady progress, particularly around creating a college-going culture and raising students' and families' awareness of postsecondary education options and financing. Among those educators who were familiar with GEAR UP, almost all (95%) reported that GEAR UP has had a *beneficial* (58%) or *very beneficial* (37%) impact on the majority of their students. A number of challenges were also identified through the evaluation, including low academic achievement, low expectations for students on the part of educators, difficulties engaging parents, need for greater career relevance, and lack of time for implementing and assessing the effectiveness of GEAR UP activities. The following are key priority areas and recommendations moving forward.

MOVING FORWARD

- **Continue to focus GEAR UP resources and messaging on the importance of academic preparation for school and postsecondary success.** Strategies may include: ensuring that GEAR UP school plans (particularly for schools with low academic achievement) include robust academic supports and interventions for grades and subject areas with the greatest needs, continue to organize model school visits in schools demonstrating academic gains and/or implementing innovative strategies, and identifying additional PD opportunities for educators around academic rigor.
- **Work on streamlining and connecting college exploration with career exploration activities and promoting career awareness and relevance.** Strategies may include: encouraging schools to help students make connections to the careers they are interested in and the majors or programs they might want to explore before each college visit and fair, increasing course offerings for students associated with careers of interest, and expanding opportunities for workplace visits and internships.
- **Figure out ways for GEAR UP and schools to emphasize trade or vocational schools as viable postsecondary options.** Strategies may include: sharing relevant resources and information about high quality programs, continuing to tailor GEAR UP messaging to include these options, and encouraging schools to celebrate students who pursue these avenues alongside their 2-year and 4-year college-bound peers.
- **Identify additional strategies for schools to engage parents and guardians in school events and GEAR UP activities.** Strategies may include: allowing teachers to dedicate some of their PD time to calling parents and building trusting relationships with them, having events that are entirely presented in a different language so they are more accessible, encouraging schools to provide childcare and/or plan events for the entire family, creating fliers and fact sheets on key financial aid information and deadlines, and continuing to share promising practices at GEAR UP events.
- **Continue to provide time, space, and resources for schools to plan, implement, and assess GEAR UP activities.** Strategies may include: continuing to provide dedicated time during the SUCCESS retreat and other GEAR UP meetings for staff to plan and reflect on GEAR UP implementation, encouraging schools to add monthly GEAR UP team time (and resources needed for that) in their GEAR UP plans, and sharing promising practices on how to increase educator involvement in college and career readiness activities as a way to share GEAR UP responsibilities among staff and alleviate the coordinators' GEAR UP-related workload.



ABOUT METIS ASSOCIATES



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