

AND COLLEGE FOR ALL: REVISITED

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In May 2002, “And College for All” appeared in *Principal Leadership*, an educational journal. Since then, the GEAR UP program that spawned that article has expanded to include another school district and two high schools, in addition to the original Grant Middle School. The benefits from their innovative educational support services are expanding to include the high school students and families being served by the program, as well as the tutors themselves.

Schools and school districts are offering fewer academic services. As a result, many students do not get the additional services and the individualized attention they need to succeed in our public schools. Cutting supplemental academic services particularly impacts a particular group of students, those in transition from middle school to high school. One solution is to offer tutorial services utilizing college students hired on a part time basis.

The following stories illustrate the impact that individual tutoring can have on students in their difficult transition from middle school to high

school. These stories also illustrate the need for supplemental instruction outside the classroom. One of the college students, who offer the tutorial services, described by the students as turning their lives around and increasing their self-esteem, describes his own struggle to succeed academically.

GEAR UP is a federally funded program in several area schools in San Diego County, and around the country. GEAR UP offers in class tutoring, an after school tutorial program aimed at completing homework, professional development opportunities for teachers and staff, field trips and other cultural activities for students including visits to area colleges and universities, and support for parents to help them guide their children through the public schools and into college.

Going from middle school to high school can be an intimidating experience, even for well-prepared students. But for students who have marginal skills in language and math, the problems encountered in the transition process can mean the end of their formal education. The students at Grant Middle School served by the California State University, San Marcos GEAR UP program encounter severe transition issues from middle to high school. Grant Middle School is located in Escondido, California, in one of most poverty stricken corridors in San Diego County. Nearly 90% of

the students at Grant qualify for free or reduced price lunches under the National School Lunch Act, nearly twice the percentage found in schools elsewhere in California and San Diego County. The number of limited English proficient (LEP) students at Grant is twice the California average for middle level schools. More than half of Grant students will not even finish high school. It is no wonder that the transition from middle to high school can be a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for many students.

The Transition to High School

Language is perhaps the most important skill for success in the transition from middle to high school. Betty, a tenth grade student, felt that she was not adequately prepared for high school by her middle school language arts teachers. Betty's problems with language arts became the focus of her life in the seventh grade. "Any time I tried to ask for help, she would get mad. Sometimes I would even be scared to ask her", Betty recalled, of her seventh grade language arts teacher. "When I went home after school, I used to pick up my language arts book and just start studying. My friends would come and tell me to go outside, but I would tell them, "No, I'm studying."” Even her devotion to her studies did little to raise her self-confidence. Betty had great difficulty concentrating, but her main

barrier to success was stress. “When it was time for the test, I was so nervous that I failed. I also could not concentrate at all.”

Her counselor directed Betty to the GEAR UP tutorial program. “Finally, I got a lot of help, and they also taught me how not to get nervous when a test comes. I started getting better grades and also better test scores. When the biggest test came, I was not nervous at all. My parents and my teacher were really proud of me. I was really proud of myself”, Betty commented, her self-esteem soaring. “The way I felt when I knew I could do it was very special for me. I did not think I would ever get to this point.”

Betty offers this insight and advice for other students in a similar situation: “When I passed that big test, I felt like saying to myself, “I finally did it.” I was really, really proud of myself, and if I could do it, so can you. All you have to do is believe in yourself like I did.”

Erika is now a tenth grade student. But passing her ninth grade courses was not an easy task. She had a rocky start in her secondary educational experience. For Erika, just beginning the transition to high school became a nightmare.

“I was failing everything, except P.E.”, she lamented. “I was afraid to talk in class. I was so afraid that I was doing everything wrong, that I did not turn in any work.” Erika just froze when it came to participating in class

and handing in schoolwork. She felt lost and without hope. Rescue came in several ways.

First, Erika's counselor, Mr. Ibarra, suggested that she take advantage of free GEAR UP tutorials offered daily after school. "He said I had to raise my grades. If I didn't, they would kick me out of school. I felt scared, but I had to do something", she explained with a frown.

Second, Erika went to the tutorial sessions after school. She didn't know what to expect or how she would be treated. "They helped me write essays and do my math. The teachers explain it differently, but I got it when they explain it here", she said, referring to the GEAR UP tutors who helped her. Erika started doing her work and handing it in. She was surprised at her sudden progress. She began passing all of her courses and her grades improved week by week.

"I got A's on all my essays", she said proudly. "Now I understand what to say in class, where I didn't talk before. I feel better about myself and my parents are happy. I want to go to college now, whereas before, I didn't want to go to high school. I just hope my little brother and sister don't have the problems I did."

Unfortunately, Erika's story is not unusual. Without the support she received, it is likely that she would have abandoned her high school

experience and found a low paying job. The future looked bleak and she had low self-esteem. But it is also encouraging that Erika turned her life around so quickly with the support of academic tutoring. Clearly, she had the ability to succeed academically, but the new environment of high school was so intimidating and lacking in needed support that she felt lost and unable to succeed.

Tutors Make the Difference

Carmelino Cruz is a junior at Cal State San Marcos. Carmelino came to the United States from Mexico when he was nine years old. His family, migrant farm workers, traveled around California looking for work. He sees much of what he went through in the students he tutors for GEAR UP:

“Many of them have problems with reading and writing and come from families where parents speak little English and are not able to help them. They have no idea of the choices that are open to them.”

Carmelino began his high school education at San Marcos High School, where he received tutoring and support from AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), but he moved to Fresno after his freshman year. Academic tutorial support was not readily available to him in Fresno. Carmelino recalls his high school counselor at Fresno: “The counselor told

me that there was little hope for me to go to college.” Fortunately, Carmelino returned to San Marcos for his senior year of high school. There, his AVID teacher, Mrs. Shipp, worked with him to develop a road map to college. His individual plan included being at school at 6:30 a.m. to repeat classes where he had done poorly. “Without AVID and Mrs. Shipp, I wouldn’t be in college today”, Carmelino said.

Mr. Cruz is passing along the benefits of individual tutoring and of an academic support system to his students. He recently tutored at Escondido High School, where he worked one-on-one with a high school senior who spoke Farsi, but was reading English at the third grade level. “He would read to me and summarize what he read”, Carmelino recalled. “We went through work sheets, rules of grammar, and lists of words.” When the semester ended, the student was reading at the sixth grade level, had improved his comprehension, and was writing book reports.

Mr. Cruz is planning on a career in academic counseling to help disadvantaged students. “I want to show them what is available and that everything is possible. If I can influence even one, that would be a wonderful thing.” With academic support and self esteem, success in school is attainable, especially with tutorial services from programs like GEAR UP, AVID, and support from teachers and tutors who understand the problems

faced by students whose language and other skills are below par.

Expanding Tutorial Programs

In our present economy, educational services are shrinking, especially for low-income students in school districts that are trimming services.

Tutoring is a low-cost and effective method of providing academic support services. College students are a good source for tutors, since they have the necessary skills and are inexpensive to hire on a part time basis. In addition, many college students, including those in community colleges, are receiving financial aid in the form of Federal Work Study awards. This means that a student worker is paid by their work-study award, not by the school or district that employs them. This is an available worker pool that is subsidized. Not every school or district is able to take advantage of college student tutors, but with the proliferation of community colleges throughout the country, few schools are far from a viable source of college students that can make the difference in the academic performance of their students.

Though not a panacea for the budget crunch in public education, this is a viable option for schools to provide academic services that, for some students, may make the difference to stay in school and acquire the skills that will help them succeed in school and in life.