

AND COLLEGE FOR ALL

Cite as: [Prickett, C. (2002). And College for All. Principal Leadership, High School Edition, v. 2, no. 9, pp. 35-37]

Grant Middle School is located in a Latino neighborhood in Escondido, California. Grant students have low graduation rates, high poverty, and a high percentage receive federally subsidized breakfasts and lunches. Grant parents are perceived by the teachers as not being involved in the education of their children. 85% of Grant parents speak Spanish but less than 10% of Grant teachers and no administrators are bilingual in Spanish.

The educational level of adults in the Grant neighborhood is very low, with only 16% with a college degree. The educational level of Grant parents is another severe problem. The vast majority of our parents have never attended college. Grant students are the first generation of their families to realistically aim at attaining a college education. The attrition rates at the two secondary schools attended by Grant students are even more disturbing, with 32% and 41% dropout rates, respectively.

The numbers of limited English proficiency (LEP) students at Grant are very high. The California and District percentages of LEP students are 23%, whereas the Grant students are at the 43% level. Unless one speaks

Spanish at Grant, communication is difficult. While most LEP parents do not have the English language proficiency to engage in many of the typical parent involvement activities, they may be very successfully involved in parent-school collaboration at home. Bilingual community liaisons should be available to bridge language and cultural differences between home and school. (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986)

If this sounds like an introduction to a Jonathan Kozol novel, do not be alarmed. This is a vignette about a success story, a GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) project. Grant Middle School, in partnership with California State University, San Marcos, is the recipient of a federal GEAR UP grant.

A key portion of the CSUSM/GEAR UP grant is the presentation of professional development activities for teachers and administrators at Grant. In 2001 there have been three professional development retreats for Grant staff. One of the components of these retreats has been the completion of the School Self Assessment Rubric (SSAR). The SSAR is designed to pinpoint some of the problem areas that impede the process of change in public schools. At Grant, one of the main recurring themes at these retreats gleaned from SSAR responses is the opinion that the parents of Grant students are not involved in the education of their children.

When parents call the main office at Grant, office personnel who answer the telephone do not speak Spanish. It is not a mystery to ascertain that parents who call or come to the school cannot speak with their children's teachers or the school administrators about their children's education. In contrast, 75% of our GEAR UP staff are fluent in Spanish. Because we can effectively communicate with parents and families, their participation in Grant activities has sharply risen. For example, over 300 parents have graduated from the Parent Institute for Quality Education. This is a GEAR UP sponsored nine week program aimed at improving adolescent child-parent relationships, providing strategies to improve academic performance, and college and career planning. Parents now regularly participate in school activities, including chaperoning social activities, in class tutoring, participating in phone trees, sending out mass mailings, coaching school sports teams, and supervising field trips to area colleges.

The success of Grant students depends in large part upon the support of their families and parental communication with their teachers. Epstein (1985) has concluded, "the evidence is clear that parental encouragement, activities and interest at home, and parental participation in schools and classrooms positively influence achievement, even after the students' ability and family socioeconomic status are taken into account." Researchers have

consistently found that several variables encourage parent involvement, such as the amount and quality of teacher communications. (Ames et al., 1993, Epstein, 1986) Many parents have reported that they would be more involved in helping their children at home if teachers communicated more with them, or requested their cooperation. (Epstein, 1986)

The economics of the Grant neighborhood are particularly disturbing. Over ninety percent (90%) of the students at Grant meet the criteria under the National School Lunch Act. This figure is nearly two times the statewide figure for California (47%) as well as for San Diego County (46%). The Grant neighborhood has 28% of families below the poverty level, which is over twice the poverty rate in California (13%) and nearly three times the national poverty rate (10%).

The curriculum is expected to begin to reflect the culture and mores of the students and their families. This is a distinct change from the present curriculum that includes only very basic information about Latino cultures. The infusion of Latino culture into the curriculum is expected to have the effect of greater student engagement in the learning process and greater parental involvement in school activities and in the classroom. For many aspects of Latino culture, parents and members of the neighborhood community will be utilized as experts to help educate the students about

their culture. (Brown, etc., Authentic Education) The use of community resources will serve to strengthen the community ties to their school.

Rates of retention in middle school and high school, coupled with attendance at a college or university, are the most important indicators of the success of the Grant Middle School GEAR UP Project. It is hoped, and the current educational research bears this out, that students and families who are engaged in the educational process are more likely to stay in school, do well in school, do well on standardized tests, and are more likely to enroll in an institution of higher education.

In accordance with the main goal of GEAR UP, that of instilling in Grant students and their families that a college education is attainable, several programs and activities are in place.

GEAR UP sponsors College Making It Happen night, which includes visits by area college representatives. In addition, there are also financial aid experts on hand to advise parents on the costs of college and how to effectively plan for that future expense. An important aspect of this program is the dissemination of information about the greatly increased earnings one may expect from earning a college education.

College visits are an important part of the process of familiarizing Grant students and their families with area colleges and the services they

provide. GEAR UP has sponsored four visits to area colleges during this reporting period. As a result, Grant students now view college as an attainable goal. They have a vision of a college campus and a real concept of college life.

Five academic scholarships in cooperation with a primary GEAR UP partner, UNISYS, a scholarship fund has been established, even though it will be nearly five years until a scholarship will be awarded. UNISYS has begun this fund with a \$1500.00 gift, and has pledged several times that amount in the next couple of years. In addition, COX Communication has also pledged a donation to this fund. It is projected that this fund will be able to assist several Grant students with their college expenses. The very existence of this fund is another incentive for our students to strive to attain the grades and education they need to qualify for entrance into college.

The exercise of going through the GEAR UP rubric of the SSAR focused the Grant staff on the process of change. Armed with the resolve to improve the academic quality of instruction at Grant, the staff identified specific strategies, which have become the model for continuing the change process the rest of this year, and the 2001-2001 school year. The professional atmosphere here at Grant is positive and focused on change and improvement. This is an exciting place to be.