



Memorial/Spring Branch News

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Program helps prepare students for college

Spring Woods High freshmen GEAR UP for future

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When Alejandro Perez talks about attending college, it's not a matter of "if" the Spring Woods High School freshman goes. It's a matter of when.

Perez has been taking a serious look at his future after high school since the seventh grade, when he signed up to participate in Spring Branch school district's GEAR UP program, an extensive effort that prepares students for college undergraduate studies.

About the program

GEAR UP is a U.S. Department of Education initiative administered by the Spring Branch Independent School District. It strives to work with pupils throughout their middle school and high school careers to help prepare them and motivate them for college.

Spring Branch ISD launched its first GEAR UP program in September 2002, with a \$2 million grant from the Department of Education.

The program started in the Northbrook High School attendance zone with sixth-graders at Landrum and Northbrook middle schools. Today, all of the students in the group attend Northbrook High.

The school district brought GEAR UP to a second attendance zone, Spring Woods High School, two years ago after receiving its second federal grant, this time \$2.2 million.

Again, it started with campuses that feed into the target high school, in this case Spring Oaks and Spring Woods middle schools, and now all of the participating students in this attendance zone attend Spring Woods High.

Both of these attendance zones have a high number of students who would be the first generation in their schools to attend college.

All invited

There was no selection process for students to enter the program. Everyone in the participating attendance zones was invited to be part of GEAR UP when it started.

The Northbrook and Spring Woods high school groups are the only GEAR UP programs under way at this time, but the district will launch another group if it is awarded another grant.

More grant money is expected to be available in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Because of the nature of its funding, GEAR UP is open only to students in the participating grades: 11th grade at Northbrook High and ninth grade at Spring Woods. But the program is open to transfer students into those student populations.

How it works

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs is designed to work with the same group of pupils from seventh through 12th grades.

Pupils receive counseling, mentoring, academic support, weekend and after-school programming and detailed information about applying for college along with regular opportunities to visit campuses.

"It's just a wonderful thing," Perez said. "They help you even before high school."

During weekend activities, participants frequently work with doctoral students who must satisfy degree requirements.

"It's a wonderful exchange between the students," said Lois Cunningham, GEAR UP's project evaluator.

"The students ask, what do I need to do if I want to go to Texas A&M or Blinn, and the doctoral students are able to describe the college environment and the study skills needed."

The college visits are another important part of the program, said Regina Kirkpatrick, project director for the Spring Woods GEAR UP program.

"By the time they've graduated, they will have visited a dozen colleges and universities," she said.

Pupils also can attend summer activities with transportation provided by the school district.

During the summer, students visited Spring Branch's Summer Career Carnival at the Guthrie Center; designed video games at Wonder Space Technology Camp; and built rockets at an algebra clinic at Houston Community College.

Additional activities included Rice University Summer School; the UH Engineering Program for Girls; the Tiger Power ESL program; and Houston Prep, a science, technology, engineering and math program offered at UH-Downtown.

Freshman Johnnie Tolbert III said he was especially impressed with the summer school program at Rice.

"It was fun because we had a schedule," he said. "We had to find our way around the campus and go to classes."

Sharlston Gonzalez has found himself getting excited about college since he joined GEAR UP.

"I don't want to be a nobody; I want to be a somebody in the future," he said. "GEAR UP provides us with mentors. We do different activities, and they try to help us."

Participant Ana Caceres isn't sure what kind of career she'll pursue, but she said her summer activities have given her a few ideas, especially the engineering program for girls.

"I think what they do is awesome," she said. "It got me thinking about how much I could do as an engineer."

Perez said he already knows what he wants to do: teach. And the Career Carnival only

strengthened his conviction.

"Everyone got a huge list of careers," he said. "I got one. That's what I really want to do."

Lakreshia Gadison said it means a lot to her to have the support of the program behind her.

"I wish everybody could do this," she said. "In high school, it's big to have someone you can go to if you have a problem."

Not only does GEAR UP work to excite students about their futures, it strives to involve their families, said parent liaison Norma Alvarenga, who is bilingual.

"What we do is try to inform the parents. This is the time when students need their support more than ever."

Spring Woods Principal Wayne Schaper Jr. said he's excited about welcoming the GEAR UP group to the school.

"All of the things about GEAR UP — the program's focus on the college culture, its continual focus on academic success, mentoring, parent involvement — it makes me wish I was in the ninth grade again."

Ultimately, GEAR UP encourages pupils to focus beyond the obstacles they see between themselves and college, Kirkpatrick said.

"College is possible, and it is within your reach. We're going to do everything we can to get you there."

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