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Feds award \$37 million to expand GEAR UP program at WSU Tri-Cities

By Jacques Von Lunen, Tri-City Herald

The federal Department of Education awarded a \$37 million grant to Washington State University Tri-Cities this month.

The money will go to WSU's Early Outreach department during the next seven years to expand GEAR UP -- Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs.

The program sends staff and money to predominantly low-income schools to increase their students' chances of going to college.

The grant will create about 60 new jobs in the Mid-Columbia, said Chuck Hallsted, assistant director of the WSU program. Those positions will include part-time tutors in schools, one director per school and about five employees on the Richland campus, he said.

The money allows the university to continue helping students in 16 school districts in Southeast Washington and to establish new programs in Kennewick, Mabton, Prosser, Warden and Morrow County, Ore.

The WSU program has had a presence in Pasco, Finley, Burbank and Benton City, and now will begin helping students at Park and Highlands middle schools in Kennewick.

The new grants will increase the number of students served to about 16,000 -- up from about 10,000.

The program seeks to raise students' grades, motivates them to take more-challenging courses and encourages kids to pursue going to college or vocational school after they graduate from high school.

It only is active in schools where at least half of all students qualify for free and reduced lunches, a measure of family income.

But once a school is on its list, the program helps all students in a given class, not just those from low-income families.

The program follows groups of kids through their school careers, starting with sixth- and seventh-graders, and ending when the seventh-graders are in their first year of college.

In the six years in between, GEAR UP brings tutors to students for one-on-one assistance, pays for additional computers and other classroom technology, provides professional training for teachers, holds financial-aid classes for parents, counsels students on possible careers and takes kids on field trips to college campuses.

That last part can be essential for students who are the first in their family to go to college.

"It has given our kids the experience of a college, to see what it's like on campus," said Mike Harrington, principal of Finley Middle School, where GEAR UP has operated for several years.

The program took parents to WSU's Pullman campus one year.

"Many parents had never been on a college campus," Harrington said. "College is scary. This way it gets more ingrained -- they see that they have a choice to go."

But the program did a lot more than set up field trips for the Finley school. It bought a mobile computer lab and document cameras for classrooms.

It provided tutors for math and language arts, including tutors who were available during lunch hours for kids who needed to catch up. And it allowed the school to get training for its teachers that it couldn't have paid for on its own, Harrington said.

The program tracks if the taxpayer money is efficiently spent, Hallsted said.

It surveys parents and students to make sure schools are giving them the counseling that the program pays for.

It has a full-time director at each school who checks that programs are properly administered. Schools are required to submit scores and grades for all students in the GEAR UP group. And outside evaluators crunch that data to check progress from year to year.

It works, Hallsted said. The services increase the number of students who perform at or above grade level by 30 percent, he said.

And the number of students who take advanced classes increases by nearly 10 percent after the program comes in, he said.

Kevin Pierce, the principal at Park Middle School in Kennewick, said he is "really excited" about the additional resources soon coming to his school. Park has the highest percentage of low-income kids in the Kennewick School District, he said.

The program will add more money and staff to efforts the school had tried to start on its own, he said.

"We'll increase the amount of tutors for reading and math, and have more technology," Pierce said.

The program also will increase parent outreach at the school, such as teaching parents how to retrieve their kids' grades online, he said.

And it will provide an employee who will work with the school's staff to make sure kids can envision going to college, Pierce said.

"We can get that dream planted and give them access to it," he said.

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