

# **MAINE STATE GEAR UP BIENNIAL EVALUATION**

Submitted by

**Maine Department of Education**

**In collaboration with**

**Maine Support Network and  
GEM Software Development Inc.**

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# MAINE STATE GEAR UP BIENNIAL EVALUATION

## Maine Support Network, GEM Software Development, Inc.

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This biennial evaluation is being submitted by Maine Support Network on behalf of the Maine State GEAR UP program of the Maine Department of Education. GEM Software Development, Inc., the program's external evaluator, conducted the interviews and compiled the report. The report is divided into three sections. Section One reviews the recommendations made in the previous biennial evaluation and reports the actions taken and the current status of each recommendation. Section Two reports the results of telephone interviews conducted by the principal investigator. Principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors, GEAR UP liaisons, headmasters, superintendents, assistant superintendents and members of the GEAR UP administrative team were interviewed regarding various aspects of the program. A summary statement of the responses for each question is provided. Additionally, and for purposes of readability, all non-redundant responses are contained in footnotes. Together these form the substance of Section Two. Finally, a new set of recommendations is put forth regarding aspects of the program that might be improved.

Stated without further preamble, the overriding impression gleaned from reviewing the actions taken on the recommendations from the previous biennial evaluation and from the interviews conducted with program participants is that the GEAR UP program in Maine is functioning exceptionally well. In conducting the interviews, the investigator heard overwhelming praise for the GEAR UP program and for the grant administrators at the Maine Support Network. A second impression, verified by the responses to the questions asked, was one of enthusiasm and pride on the part of the participants with regard to how much effort they are putting into getting students ready for college. The goal of creating a college-bound culture appears well on its way to being met. Perhaps the response that best illustrates the degree to which this goal is being realized was voiced by a principal at one of the larger high schools when she said, "We no longer ask *whether* a student is going to college. Now we ask *where* they're going to college."

## Section One - Recommendations from Previous Biennial Evaluation

In the previous biennial evaluation, nine recommendations were made. Each is listed below in its entirety along with a discussion of the actions taken on the recommendation, and the progress made since the recommendation was made.

1. ***Streamline the quantitative data collection process:*** The GEAR UP leadership team should work closely with the evaluation team to continue to develop a process that simplifies and streamlines the process of collecting the required GEAR UP data. As this process evolves, keep the school-based participants informed of the progress so they can maintain their optimism that the process will be less onerous in the future.

***Action Taken and Current Status:*** This recommendation has been addressed in a number of ways since the last biennial evaluation. First, all aspects of the quantitative data collection process have been incorporated into a GEAR UP homepage that each Local Education Agency (LEA) sees when it logs into the database. The homepage provides a single point of entry for accomplishing everything related to GEAR UP data collection and reporting. Data input screens were also developed to allow

LEA liaisons to batch-input student data. The annual school survey, the in-kind match, the student and parent surveys, student participation data, and even form letters to students have been incorporated into the database in an effort to streamline the management of the program. Evaluators and program administrators meet routinely to go over improvement ideas and to identify ways to reduce the workload of GEAR UP LEA staff.

- 2. *Eliminate numerical targets:*** We recommend that each performance indicator be re-written and that a growth target be substituted for the numerical target. Each of the indicators is currently worded so as to set a numerical benchmark for improvement. We caution against this practice, as do most quality improvement experts. As W. Edwards Deming (1986)<sup>1</sup> contended, a numerical goal “is incompatible with never-ending improvement.” Moreover the targets are arbitrary and not based on historical data of sufficient quantity to allow a predictable range. As to the arbitrary nature, indicator 1.1.1 says that “30% of GEAR UP students will pass pre-algebra by the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade.” Why 30%? Why not 29% or 35%? If pre-algebra is considered important why isn’t the expectation that ALL GEAR UP students pass it by the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade? Third, a numerical goal can negate considerable improvement. For example, Indicator 5.5.2 stated that “*In year two of the GEAR UP program, the number of advisors using computers for teaching and learning will increase by 10%, in year three by 15%, in year four by 35%, in year five by 45%, and in year six by 55%.*” Results showed that for SY 2005-06, 95.1% of advisors were using computers for teaching and learning yet this target was not met because the growth from year 1 to year 2 was only 7.3% (87.8% - 95.1%). It may turn out that strategies to improve the use of computers are discarded because the target was not met. However, 7.3% growth may be statistically significant, meaning that the strategies were, in fact, working quite well. Our recommendation is that the indicators be re-worded so as to show improvement. For example, indicator 1.3.2 currently reads, “The percentage of GEAR UP 10th grade PSAT test takers achieving a score of 45 or higher will increase by 10%.” We recommend it be written to say, “The percentage of GEAR UP 10th grade PSAT test takers achieving a score of 45 or higher will increase.”

*Action Taken and Current Status:* This recommendation has been fully addressed. All performance indicators have been rewritten with an emphasis on growth rather than an emphasis on attaining an arbitrary numerical goal. For example,

Old Wording - 60% of GEAR UP students will pass Algebra I by the end of the 9th grade.

New Wording - The percentage GEAR UP students passing Algebra I by the end of the 9th grade will increase each year.

- 3. *Rewrite the LEA annual plan template:*** We recommend two possible courses of action. The first is to rework the annual LEA plan template to ensure consistency with what is currently being measured. This recommendation is based on the observation that what is expected of LEAs in their annual plan is insufficiently focused on the key elements being measured in the evaluation. This was noted by liaisons and RTACs (Regional Technical Assistance Coordinators) when the 2007-2008 submissions of LEA annual plans were reviewed. The annual plan template has been carefully constructed and asks for a considerable amount of information related to how the LEA plans to run its GEAR UP program. The one area that is directly connected to what is being evaluated asks only that LEAs check a box to indicate that key objectives are being addressed. From our perspective, if LEAs check this box, they would need to explain which strategies will help them help students accomplish the objectives. The second option is to refine the objectives to mirror more closely the seven activities listed on the Maine GEAR UP bookmark. Those seven activities are designed to reflect and support the project’s goal and its five main objectives. The activities listed on the bookmark are: 1. All students take college courses; 2. All students have individual learning plans; 3. All seniors complete their FAFSA before March 1; 4. All parents are actively involved in their child’s education; 5. All seniors complete at least one application to attend a post secondary school; 6. All schools increase the number of rigorous courses including AP and college courses; and 7. All schools promote high aspirations for all students by facilitating student engagement in a supportive learning environment. In any event, the annual plan template should be rewritten to more closely parallel the requirements of the grant.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Edwards Deming Out of the Crisis. Boston: MIT Press (1986)

*Action Taken and Current Status:* Program administrators and evaluators have worked to ensure the alignment of the LEA plan to the actual performance measures that are reported in the Annual Performance Report (APR). The thinking was that the more the grant administrators could focus the LEA on the goals and objectives of the GEAR UP grant, the more attention the LEAs would pay to improving the performance measures.

To that end, the LEA plan has gone through three necessary iterations, with each getting closer to what was envisioned in the previous biennial evaluation. In the first iteration (the initial template) LEAs were asked to thoughtfully examine what was to be accomplished as a GEAR UP LEA participant and to address questions such as *How will you create a sustainable college bound culture?* and *How will you execute the project?* The emphasis here was on helping the LEAs understand their own expectations for the program, e.g., *What goals do you hope to achieve through your involvement?*

In the second iteration, LEAs were asked to reflect on the goals identified in the previous plan and to use one or more of six perspectives to focus improvement efforts, viz., *Leadership, Professional Development, Curriculum Improvement, Learning Strategies, Student Level Supports, and Family and Community Engagement*. The intent behind this version was to help LEAs focus on building the necessary infrastructure to ensure program success.

While this iteration of the plan was instrumental in focusing LEAs on how best to attain the critical success-generating components of the program, it was determined that the plan had to go one step further. First, it was agreed that the main focus of the plans should be on strategies for areas needing improvement. These needs were determined on the basis of the LEA's performance on each of the indicators reported in the APR. Second, it was determined that the plan should become an integral part of the database. That way, data could be pulled directly from the plan and put into the APR as needed.

We believe the most recent iteration of the plan has accomplished what was initially envisioned. Where the first plan helped align the goals of the LEA to the goals of the grant, and the second helped build the necessary infrastructure to accomplish the goals of the program, the third drew the LEA's attention to areas that comparative analysis identified as areas in which they needed to improve. It required the LEA to put together a robust planning team that included individuals from other college-bound initiatives, principals, guidance counselors, LEA liaisons, parents, and students. Each LEA was then required to review its performance indicator reports and identify areas where performance was below the state average. (A link to these reports is on each LEA's GEAR UP homepage and the report is designed to show how the LEA compares with the average of all other LEAs. It flags those indicators where the LEA lags behind other program participants). For each instance where performance was below par, a corrective action plan was required. The corrective action plan had LEAs answer the following questions:

- a. What strategy/activity will you use to improve performance on this indicator?
- b. What will your school leadership team do to make this strategy work?
- c. What professional development activities do you need to make this strategy work?
- d. What curriculum improvements should be made for this strategy to work?
- e. What teaching and learning strategies are necessary to make this strategy work?
- f. What student level supports are needed to make this strategy work?
- g. What family and community engagement activities are required to make this strategy work?
- h. How will you monitor the implementation of this strategy?
- i. How will you evaluate the implementation of this strategy?
- j. Who will provide oversight for implementation monitoring and evaluation of this objective?

The LEA plan has now been incorporated into the GEAR UP database, accessible to both LEAs and administrators. In addition, an integrated scoring template was added which allows the administrative team to independently score each plan on each of the items (a) thru (j), above. A summary section then allows the raters to collaboratively score the plan using a five-option rubric [modeled after the *determination levels* used by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for scoring State Education Agencies (SEAs) on their performance]. The database compiles the results of the scoring

and indicates the percentage of LEAs<sup>2</sup> falling into each determination level category. This provides the administrative team with quantitative information they can use to direct their technical assistance efforts.

<u>SCORING THE ANNUAL PLAN</u>	
1.	<input type="radio"/> <b>Exemplary Plan Development.</b> The district has developed a rich and comprehensive plan that could serve as a model for other GU districts.
2.	<input type="radio"/> <b>Meets the requirements of the plan.</b>
3.	<input type="radio"/> <b>Needs assistance in meeting the requirements of the plan.</b> The district plan needs minor modifications in order to comply with everything that was requested.
4.	<input checked="" type="radio"/> <b>Needs intervention in meeting the requirements of the plan.</b> The GU administrative team needs to work closely with district plan writers to assure they develop the plan according to what was requested.
5.	<input type="radio"/> <b>Needs substantial intervention in meeting the requirements of the plan.</b> An onsite visit or something comparable is needed to help the district formulate what the district plan should entail.

The results of the scoring for the most recent plan showed that three LEAs (16.7%) met the requirements of the plan. Eight LEAs (44.4%) needed assistance in meeting the requirements of the plan. Five (28.8%) LEAs needed intervention in meeting the requirements of the plan, and two LEAs (11.1%) needed substantial intervention in meeting the requirements of the plan. One-on-one technical assistance is underway for all LEAs that need assistance or intervention in meeting the requirements of the plan.

4. **Renumber and reorganize objectives and indicators:** This is a trivial recommendation but one that will aid future dialogue. The original numbering system resulted in indicators related to certain topics being scattered throughout the evaluation. Indicators related to the PSAT for example, were included under Objective 1 and Objective 3. A re-organization would group similar topics together and provide a more robust and succinct view of the grant requirements. It would also eliminate indicators that are redundant (PSAT participation) or not useful (4 years of English is a requirement for graduation). The other important part of this work has to do with writing the indicators in such a way that quantitative data can be collected.

*Action Taken and Current Status:* The action needed on this recommendation is complete. Indicators were reorganized and re-numbered in a way that grouped like-indicators together under the same objective. Similarly, redundant and meaningless indicators were removed from the list (see recommendation). Once regrouped, each indicator was parsed and rewritten in a way that defined what constituted the numerator and the denominator for each, and, in instances where the indicator had more than one meaning, facilitated the development of additional numerators and denominators. Renumbering the indicators also allowed the MIS system to map student services (participation data) to the indicators, using a method that tied each group of performance indicators to one of the higher level groupings shown below:

- College level course work
- High stakes tests
- Attendance
- Promotion
- Graduation
- College-bound
- Parent student awareness, belief in the possibility of the student attending college
- Work exploration/experiences

Grouping student participation activities to these higher level groupings is considerably more intuitive than attempting to assign a specific activity to a specific performance indicator.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that the database that is used by participating LEAs uses the term "district" as indicated in the snapshot from the database shown below.

5. **Audit Student Identifiers:** We recommend an audit of the Maine Education Data Management System (MEDMS) IDs since a number of these had to be entered by hand. Data showing performance and participation in high stakes tests rely on accurate identifiers. This recommendation would have schools request the audit, MDOE would provide the list, and GEM would cross reference the data with the audited identifiers.

*Action Taken and Current Status:* Taking action on this recommendation was critical to ensuring the validity and integrity of the data. Each participating school was tasked with matching what they had in their GEAR UP database as a student identifier with the unique identifier provided by MEDMS. We obtained demographic data from MEDMS for the GEAR UP schools, and then ran a script that matched students to their MEDMS IDs based on first name, last name, date-of-birth and school. We returned a list of students for whom the MEDMS IDs did not match, and the schools were required to replace their existing IDs with the MEDMS IDs, obtained from the State. For some LEAs this task was difficult - for others it was minor. Once this process was complete, the problem of incomplete records and multiple student records was virtually eliminated. It also allowed the new GEM system to import the results of high stakes test directly into the system rather than requiring school staff to enter the data by school, student-by-student. This cut back considerably on the data-entry workload required of each LEA.

In addition, a login and verification process for high-school seniors was created in order to more accurately capture their personal identifying information, and distribute information about scholarship eligibility. This process has streamlined and simplified the process of awarding scholarships for the Finance Authority of Maine, the program partner that administers the GEAR UP scholarships.

6. **Add the student and parent surveys to the GEM database:** We recommend that the student and parent surveys be incorporated into the software developed by GEM for this evaluation. The Maine Parent Federation (MPF) could still administer the surveys but GEM would be the repository for the data. This would eliminate the need for MPF to do data entry twice and provide summary forms for the evaluators to enter. Along these same lines, additional questions could be added that would allow indicators to be evaluated have not been evaluated to date.

*Action Taken and Current Status:* Both the student and parent surveys have been added to the new database developed by GEM. Parents are given a login and password as are students. LEA liaisons are able to track which students have completed the survey and which haven't, allowing them to target specific students and more easily increase their response rate. Additionally, it is now possible to correlate parent and student responses. The need for dual data entry has been eliminated because of action taken on this recommendation, and reports can now be compiled by any number of demographic variables. Cross-LEA comparisons of both response rate and response substance for parents and students can now be made.

7. **Add parent contact information:** Along these lines, we also recommend parent contact information be kept as part of the student's record.

*Action Taken and Current Status:* Parent contact information has been added to the database and is now part of each student record. Student and parent verification of this information is built in to the surveys, allowing for more frequent updating and correction of errors.

8. **Provide comparative information to LEAs:** The data collected for this evaluation were collected at the school level. Provisions should be made to statistically analyze the results of the various indicators and determine if any LEAs stand out, either negatively or positively. Strengths can be shared across LEAs and opportunities for improvement could be identified and result in specific improvement strategies being developed.

*Action Taken and Current Status:* A considerable amount of work has been accomplished around this recommendation. Each school now has a link on its **gearupmedata** home page that allows it to see

where it stands on each of the performance indicators in relation to other schools in the GEAR UP program. Table 1 below is an example of this work.

This table shows the percentage of GEAR UP students completing one or more math courses in addition to Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry by the time of high school graduation. The table shows a single school over a four year period, from 2005-2006 through 2008-2009. The legend for the column headers (the items in green) is as follows:

- N** - numerator - the number of students who took additional courses.
- D** - denominator - the number of students who might have taken additional courses.
- %** - the numerator divided by the denominator
- Avg.** - the average for all schools in the GEAR UP program.
- %-Avg.** - the school's percentage minus the average for all GEAR UP schools.
- UCL** - Upper Control Limit - a statistical upper limit based on the average for all GEAR UP schools, and the number of students in the sample.
- LCL** - Lower Control Limit a statistical lower limit based on the average for all GEAR UP schools, and the number of students in the sample.
- Note:** The UCL and LCL form a band within which a school's average can be expected to fluctuate.
- Outlier:** If a LEA's percentage is below what would be expected given the UCL and LCL the outlier cell will read "Low!" If the percentage is greater than expected the outlier cell will return a "High!" If it is within the band, the outlier cell will be blank.

Table 1

1.4 The percentage of GEAR UP students completing one or more mathematics courses (where offered), in addition to Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry by the time of high school graduation will increase each year.  
Numerator: # of 12th grade GU students completing at least 1 math class other than Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry by end of HS  
Denominator: # of 12th grade GU students in high schools which offer at least 1 math class other than Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry

School	School-year 2005-2006									
	Other Math	N	D	%	Avg.	%-Avg.	UCL	LCL	Outlier?	
High School	Y	58	81	72 %	62%	10%	78%	46%		

  

School	School-year 2006-2007									
	Other Math	N	D	%	Avg.	%-Avg.	UCL	LCL	Outlier?	
High School	Y	69	77	90 %	66%	24%	83%	50%	High!	

  

School	School-year 2007-2008									
	Other Math	N	D	%	Avg.	%-Avg.	UCL	LCL	Outlier?	
High School	Y	60	63	95 %	76%	19%	92%	60%	High!	

  

School	School-year 2008-2009									
	Other Math	N	D	%	Avg.	%-Avg.	UCL	LCL	Outlier?	
High School	Y	50	51	98 %	76%	22%	94%	58%	High!	

Data in the table above indicate that this particular high school had a greater than expected number of students taking advanced math courses. In 2005-06 the UCL was 83%, yet 90% of the students took advanced math. Likewise for both 2007-08 and 2008-09 the number of students taking advanced math exceeded what was expected by chance, given the average for all GEAR UP schools and the number of students comprising the sample in this school.

This kind of comparative analysis is being used in conjunction with creating the annual LEA plan as outlined in recommendation three above.

9. **Rework the new MIS system:** The GEM system that replaced the GOES system was initially designed to mirror in many ways the previous system so as to retain as much of the visual presentation as possible and to facilitate changeover to the GEM system. However, the need for numerous design changes became apparent in the course of this exercise (e.g., having to go to two different pages to provide student status), and these flaws should be eliminated.

*Action Taken and Current Status:* A substantial amount of work went into the redesign and reworking of the GEM database. Every effort was made to minimize the work involved in data entry. Some of the major changes made to the database are listed below.

- Reports are now available to indicate where data are missing. Previously, each record had to be thoroughly examined for missing data.
- Batch forms show lists of all students on a single page along with check boxes to minimize data entry. Previously, data entry was done student-by-student.
- Data are auto-entered where possible (e.g., changes in grade from year to year, high stakes test scores, etc.).
- A senior data self-verification process has been put in place. In collaboration with the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME) this process:
  - Allows liaisons to know which students have filed the FAFSA form and which haven't.
  - Is updated with current data each week as students file the FAFSA.
  - Shows the current scholarship eligibility for all seniors.
  - Provides an historical perspective of college enrollment and scholarship take-rate.
  - Allows data exchange with the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME.)
- Matching contribution entry forms have been added.
- An archive has been added so that all past indicator reports, LEA plans, school questionnaires, data summaries and exited students can be accessed at any time.
- A Report Menu houses links to the current LEA plan, school questionnaire, senior verification accounts, student survey, and student form letters.
- Student participation data have been indexed to the indicators by the initial selection of one of the following:
  - College level course work
  - High stakes tests
  - Attendance
  - Promotion
  - Graduation
  - College-bound
  - Parent student awareness, belief in the possibility of the student attending college
  - Work exploration/experiences

Once a new activity is set up and described and the allotted time, date and duration are defined, students and parents who participate in the activity can be selected either by individual or by grade. The total service hours are automatically calculated.

- Activities are automatically brought into the in-kind/match worksheet which is set up to allow data entry of in-kind/match by the activities listed under participation.
- Once a course is set up, student enrollment in that course can be selected from a group list.
- To avoid errors and duplication, once a student has been added to a course, that student will no longer appear on the selection list. This prevents a student from being entered twice for the same course.

## Section Two - Telephone Interview Results

For purposes of this section, fourteen questions were developed to get a sense from GEAR UP school staff as to how the program was working. A total of 19 people were interviewed from 13 of the 18 participating GEAR UP school LEAs. The questions are listed below along with a response summary for each. For purposes of readability and space, a non-redundant list of responses to each question is presented in a footnote format.

1. **Overall, how is the GEAR UP program working for you and your LEA?** All respondents indicated the GEAR UP program was working well in their LEA.
  - a. When asked **What are the greatest strengths of the program?**, the most frequently encountered response was the scholarships and financial aid options the program provides. Next was the opportunities the program provides to students who might not otherwise have a chance to go to college. Still others thought that the emphasis on promoting education beyond high school was the program's greatest strength. Some thought the flexibility of the program and the way it could be integrated with other available programs was important. In Maine's largest LEA, the idea that all three of the LEA's high schools were able to rally around a single program was important. For a couple of people, the new opportunity for eligible students to receive the GEAR UP scholarship out-of-State was a great strength; and in a few instances, the greatest strength of the program was the GEAR UP liaison in their LEA.<sup>3</sup>
  - b. When asked **What aspects of the program need to be changed?** many respondents said that "nothing" needed to be changed. This was followed by "more funding" for college visits and one-on-one tutoring. Two respondents voiced the need for more clerical support to help the LEA liaison, and another requested that the annual plan come earlier in the year. The few who said that data input was a problem also indicated it was better with the new system. Two wanted the program to reach into the lower grades.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> **Non-redundant responses to Question 1a: What are the greatest strengths of the program.**

- Really having all three schools on board. Initially the program was a X High School initiative. Now it's reaching out to all three high schools.
- Individual attention given to those students who otherwise wouldn't get it.
- Each of the kids has an advisor and an advisory group that keeps them on top of their college application and other things they need to do. In middle school, all kids belong to focus groups.
- Financial Assistance. Also our liaison is wonderful - works with any student who needs help with forms, not just GEAR UP students.
- Getting kids involved in high level classes, talking about aspirations, looking at different college options, involving parents - we have had a variety of parent programs.
- It's flexible, we're able to integrate it with other programs, it opens up avenues to students for postsecondary school, it also helps with Financial Aid.
- The main focus is on promoting postsecondary school, the scholarship fund is great. We also get great advice from our regional advisor.
- The program opens up opportunities for people who wouldn't ordinarily be able to go to college. It also shows families that there are ways to do it. Good for community.
- Person in charge in our LEA.
- Our liaison - persistent, smart, works collaboratively with everyone. She's approachable, a team player.
- Our liaison comes from a college background and special education background. Understands the kids. The one-to-one support to kids is the focus.
- The collaboration between guidance, social workers and liaison They all work closely together. All aware of mission.
- Person running it [liaison] - she keeps it going.
- Plans developed from LEA's perspective based on what they think students need.
- Program not providing as much as it used to.
- Scholarships. I like the way it helps students and works with them.
- The scholarship is a real incentive. Really makes a difference. Happy with the fact that in our school ten out of eleven kids got scholarship.
- The new grant is more geared to all students with regard to creating a college bound culture.

<sup>4</sup> **Non-redundant responses to Question 1b: What needs to be changed about the program?**

- Clerical assistance to the LEA liaison would be helpful.
- Sometimes inputting data into the database is a hassle. But it's better now.
- The data piece. Been doing it for 4 years. Always meant manual data entry. Has smoothed out with new system.
- Having to work on the LEA plan at the end of the year.
- More funding for college trips would be helpful.
- More money.
- More put into the early college program. Like to have more GEAR UP money go there.
- More one-on-one tutoring, more related to college prep - those things were very beneficial.
- More parent involvement
- Need to continue to figure out how we can coordinate everything to avoid duplication of effort and make sure everyone is getting what they need. Need to keep things simple even as population becomes more complex.
- I'd like to put more effort into the 9th grade program, particularly like to do more with 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition.

2. ***How is the GEAR UP program affecting your LEA in terms of the number of graduates that are prepared for and apply to college?*** The responses to this question were overwhelmingly positive in terms of the increasing number of students now applying for and going to college. A couple of respondents were able to cite impressive year-to-year statistics showing the increase. Only one respondent indicated there wasn't a "big difference" and thought they weren't being provided with the financial support they need. However, they did indicate the program was probably having "some affect" but not nearly as much as it had in the past.<sup>5</sup>
3. ***How is the new database working for your LEA overall?*** Many of the respondents interviewed were persons who had no direct contact with the database. Responses from those who did use it were very favorable. Only two difficulties were reported. One was due to confusion over which town in a union should get credit for the different data items, particularly student participation and in-kind contributions. That respondent continued, "Now that we're untangled it's working great." The second was an internal problem, having to do with getting the new screens to be accessible and updated. The respondent said, however, "E. fixed it for us the other day."<sup>6</sup>

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- Too bad it's about over.

<sup>5</sup> ***Non-redundant responses to Question 2: How is the GEAR UP program affecting your LEA in terms of the number of graduates that are prepared for and apply to college?***

- We have an increased rate of students applying for college – we're also able to give parents the information they need.
- Students are better educated about post secondary plans through the work of coordinators. The coordinators help with little things, like getting PIN numbers that students forget or need, etc..
- It's improved. Every year more kids are considering college than in the past, more are applying. Not sure how many are following through. I think we're making gradual progress.
- Increased number of students going to college over the past few years. Our students didn't use to see college as option - that's changed over the past 3 years. GEAR UP is part of an overall effort on our part to help kids prepare for postsecondary school.
- GEAR UP has supported our ongoing efforts. It's a student-by-student approach. Since 2006 our LEA has gone from 15% to 40% free and reduced lunch students. In 2006 we had 82%-83% going to college. Now it's 78%-79 % which, given the change in demographics, we feel is pretty good. GEAR UP is one of many tools we're attempting to use.
- College enrollment has increased.
- It raises aspirations of kids in poverty.
- More going to college due to college-going activities particularly from our guidance department.
- It affects our college going positively. More kids are now prepared because of advisory group.
- I'm very diligent with regard to working with seniors to give them skills, getting them to fill out FAFSA, application, etc..
- Eleven seniors went to post-secondary - that's good for X County. GEAR UP is another tool to use.
- We've had bad economic times the last couple of years. We've seen a decline in the number of parents who believe they can afford to have their kids go to college. But at least students are preparing themselves, taking the courses etc. to keep their options open.
- Some kids wouldn't go if the funds weren't available. GEAR UP plays a great role in helping them afford it.
- Can't really see any big difference. Not being provided with the financial support we need. Probably some affect but not nearly what it was 7-8 years ago.
- About 87-89% of those applying are getting accepted.
- Difficult to evaluate - we've shifted emphasis to entire school with regard to creating a college bound culture. However, in 2003, 55% of our students went to college. In 2004 to 2006 it was 52%, 54%, and 67%. Last year the percentage increased to 84%.
- Drastically improved - that whole group of kids - running between 85%, 88%, 100%. Used to be 45%-50%.

<sup>6</sup> ***Non-redundant responses to Question 3: How is the new database working for your LEA overall?***

- Working well.
- Seems to be working well.
- Apparently working beautifully. Data people used to complain all the time. Now they're not having any difficulty. Not used it much.
- Looks easy to get around.
- I like it much better.
- Pretty good. I'm a little wary about inputting all the new student cohort information.
- Best we've had so far. Always found contact people very responsive. Usually within an hour. Expectations for data collection, particularly participation data, too high. This year I've gone from 30 to 100 kids with same time allotment. Hard to get data from grade school into high school.
- Took a long time for new screens to be accessible to us. Couldn't get them updated. X fixed it for us the other day.
- Working well interfacing with software now better.
- Very well
- Working fine.

4. ***Since 2008 you've had access to state-wide and LEA-specific data on each of the GEAR UP performance indicators. The reports also show how your students performed against those in other schools and against the statewide average. Is this information valuable to you and if so in what way? How are you using the information? What additional reports would be useful?*** Respondents to this question fell into two groups - those who did not use the data at all, and those who were very attentive to what the data told them in terms of where they needed to focus their efforts. The general sense from the interviews was that LEAs were not making as much use of these data as they might.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, those who were using the data were incorporating it into their LEA plan and using it to help direct their goal setting. When asked what other reports would be useful, those who responded wanted follow-up data on what happened to their GEAR UP students, how many had stayed in college, graduated, etc.
5. ***How valuable and relevant is the current version of the annual LEA plan as a planning tool for managing your LEA's GEAR UP program?*** In Maine, the annual LEA plan, or "annual plan" as LEAs refer to it, is an integral part of the GEAR UP planning process. As indicated above in Recommendation 3, the program administrators and evaluators have spent a considerable amount of time over the past three years improving the plan to make it more useful and relevant. Questions 5, 6, and 7 were related to the annual plan. First we asked about its relevance as a planning tool; second, we asked them to compare the current format with last year's format; third, we asked what might be changed to make it more relevant.

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<sup>7</sup> ***Non-redundant responses to Question 4: Since 2008 we've been providing comparative reports. Is this information valuable to you? If so, in what way?***

- I use it to base our goals for this year on that data.
- When we first get them we look to see if we're an outlier. It tells us where to focus.
- Yes - we're not an outlier
- Yes, to see how we compare. However, what's more useful is when we can compare to other schools our size.
- Very valuable - helps us hone in on what we can do better.
- Helps us plan and prepare for what we can change, how we can provide better access to students.
- Keeps us informed as to what to do for better practice. Gives us a broader view of what's happening out there.
- Tells us what we might be missing.
- It's a great tool. Goes directly to guidance office.
- Always trying to work with LEP kids - always trying to find trends that help me figure out ways to meet their needs.
- Not really. Don't do comparison
- Haven't used that data.
- It's interesting, but I'm not a data person.
- Not knowledgeable
- Not too valuable for me. I don't share it. Our school already collects it.
- Was shared with us by [liaison].

***Non-redundant responses to Question 4a. How are you using this information?***

- Use it for tracking to see where strengths and weaknesses are and how well these data align with other things.
- For goal setting purposes.
- We just met with [two grant staff] Devising new performance indicators to better meet their needs.
- Not knowledgeable.
- Not using.
- Use it for placement of students - how many kids going on to postsecondary education, and in terms of parental involvement.
- Use it in my plan for next year.
- Use it to develop LEA plan, compare with other (NWEA) reports.
- Used for how to plan programming, what supports we can broadly offer kids.
- Using it to work one-on-one with students.
- It helps me figure out ways to meet their needs.

***Non-redundant responses to Question 4b. What additional data reports would you find useful?***

- Changes from year to year. (Note: Interviewer pointed out that she has reports going back three years.)
- Follow-up report on what students are doing now.
- Reports that disaggregate outcomes by race, ethnicity. Our problems are compounded by language/race.
- Retention rates for GEAR UP kids compared to other kids once they get to college.
- Would like a report of what happened to all seniors. Knowing what all seniors did would help us explain FAFSA filing percentage results.
- Like to see follow-up reports - how many still in-school, how many finished 5 years from now.

As the responses indicate, participants thought the annual plan was relevant to managing their program.<sup>8</sup> They also thought that the format of the plan they completed this year was easier, more “concrete sequential” and more “user friendly” than last year. The only change that was recommended was that the LEA plan template be made available for entry earlier in the school year.

What became very clear in the course of the interviews was the degree to which the GEAR UP administrative team from Maine Support Network (MSN) was instrumental in helping LEAs think through and write the plans. Over and over again, the degree of support provided by MSN was mentioned by respondents.

6. ***How does this year's format compare with the last?*** See Question 5 above and footnotes below.
7. ***What would make the LEA plan more valuable or relevant to you?*** See Question 5 above and footnotes below.
8. ***How involved are the following people in creating and implementing your LEA plan:***
  - a. **Parents?**
  - b. **Students?**

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<sup>8</sup> **Non-redundant responses to Question 5: *How relevant is the annual plan as a planning tool?***

- Good plan. [grant administrator] good at helping us buttress our weaknesses.
- To me it's valuable - more relevant - relates to goals. Specific goals in math, literacy, transition to HS are part of LEA's emphasis this year and it ties in with those initiatives.
- I find it very helpful. The newer version takes me a lot less time.
- A lot more brainstorming this year. People who came and talked to us were good. Does help narrow it down to our goals and objectives. Since they've come in to help it's worked really well. First year nobody was here to help. Really clarify what's wanted.
- Plan needs more focus on middle school.
- Currently working on new performance indicators to bring them in line with what we do and also some things we need to work on.
- The relevance is that it's tied to the goals and the performance indicators.
- Moderately useful.
- It's better that we got it earlier this year.
- We fit it to our needs. I think we have great success. We use it.
- This one much more valuable - the previous one was too vague - just had a meeting to refine our goals - the structure is very clear.
- Like to dialogue about what's good, what needs to be tweaked.
- Gives us a lot of good information, what will help us move forward. Helps us set goals.
- Very well done this year. More workable. Easier for me to comprehend what was being asked.

**Non-redundant responses to Question 6: *How does the format of this year's annual plan compare with last year?***

- Liked it better than last year. I've worked on a lot of grants and this one has a lot of specificity.
- Format this year took less time. Also, this year seemed to spread responsibility among more stakeholders. Math, English people now involved.
- Just seemed a lot easier. Took me a lot less time.
- I like the emphasis on data as it relates to my goals - two major themes - lower dropout rate, increase college going students. Current template fits right into these.
- I think it's better in that it caused us to reflect on needed improvement areas.
- I thought this year's plan was much easier to work with. The format was easier.
- Much more user friendly.
- Data very important. Everyone can be on the same page. Not much room for variation when data are there.
- Like newest one best - more organized, more readable.
- I liked it much better. It was very concrete sequential.

**Non-redundant responses to Question 7: *What would make the plan more relevant?***

- Nothing at this point.
- Section showing GEAR UP administrative staff responsibilities - who to contact if help needed in specific area.
- Nothing - We get a lot of support from GU people - they've been very helpful.
- I look at it. I see it as a written document of what we're doing.
- Can't think of anything.
- Once we re-do it to what we need, it will be more relevant.
- Not really.
- Pretty good as is.
- Nothing
- If it could come earlier in the school year.

c. **Middle school staff?**

It became obvious very quickly that many GEAR UP LEA staff were not directly involving parents, students or middle school staff in the either creating or implementing the LEA plan. This is not to say that participants did not go to great lengths to involve parents in the GEAR UP program - they did. However, when it comes to including them in the planning process there are opportunities for improvement.<sup>9</sup>

9. **What does parent involvement look like in your LEA?**<sup>10</sup> It was obvious from the people interviewed that a great deal of effort went into trying to involve parents and there appeared to be a

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<sup>9</sup> **Non-redundant responses to Question 8a. How involved are parents in creating and implementing your LEA plan:**

- Not a lot
- Very little.
- We had a representative from Maine Parent Federation come and work with us on involving parents.
- Not involved (n=8)
- Not so much in high school
- Only indirectly. MELMAC has parents on committee. We all discuss the same issues. Don't have parent on GEAR UP committee but take suggestions from parents on MELMAC committee.
- Pretty involved.
- We had a parent on our planning team.

**Non-redundant responses to Question 8b. How involved are students in creating and implementing your LEA plan:**

- Not involved (n = 9)
- Only to the extent that we evaluated their performance.
- No direct student input – if we hear suggestions in other venues we bring them forward.
- Not involved, but the guidance counselor worked with students to come up with list of goals chosen by students.
- Pretty involved.
- Very involved. Also parents are involved as needed.
- We're very small, more like a family here. Always keep lines of communication open between us and students.
- [Liaison] and X high school work together, always checking in on students to determine what would make it easier for them. Always getting feedback from students.

**Non-redundant responses to Question 8c. How involved are middle school staff in creating and implementing your LEA plan:**

- Been invited but chosen not to come. Haven't influenced plan. Might change with addition of 7th and 8th graders.
- Hard to get them involved, particularly if done at end of school year. Everyone gets a chance to look at it and recommend changes. Just two of us write the plan.
- Just middle school principal.
- Limited degree of involvement. However, this year we are focusing more on middle school.
- Not involved (n = 5)
- It's a challenge to get them on board, particularly after funding was cut. Hard feelings still not resolved.
- No, just high school.
- They're not too much a part of program any longer.
- Quite involved. Meet regularly.
- Yes – they've done some things. Someone came down from [town] to talk about health occupations.
- Yes, we worked collaboratively on what we want kids to walk away with regarding student goals and what we want kids to achieve.

<sup>10</sup> **Non-redundant responses to Question 7: What does parent involvement look like in your LEA?**

- We do 7th and 8th grade parents' night with high school fairs to attract students. Each high school does a dog and pony show and 7th and 8th graders get to show them what they can expect in each one.
- We talk on the phone to parents regularly. We have open house, parent nights, FASFA workshops. We do a lot through MELMAC grant.
- Sports events have great parent involvement. We have plenty of events where parents are invited including an open house, parent teacher conferences. However turnout is sporadic – sometimes good, sometimes not. This year it was great because we were handing out laptops. Last night we had a great turnout for senior parents. Turnout appears to be improving but not sure why. We send out postcards, call every parent about college night, 10th grade 11th grade night, financial aid night.
- [Liaison] meets with every parent of GU student, and with every household to determine what their needs are. Makes sure they're aware of financial aid forms.

great deal of innovation involved in some cases. What worked particularly well was the requirement that all parents attend student led conferences, the implementation of which boosted high school parent participation from 10-12% to 89% in one school's case, and from 15% to 93% in another. In some instances, parent/guardian attendance at student-led conferences is a graduation requirement. Financial Aid nights were also a big draw for parents, and serving food appeared to boost attendance. Despite this, none of the LEAs seemed truly satisfied with the amount of parent participation.

**10. How are the GEAR UP grant administrators doing administering the grant?<sup>11</sup>** As evaluators, we were delighted at the responses to this question as well as to the next two questions

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- We're trying to get more parents – it's a struggle, attendance hovers around 50% - without significant outreach we miss a lot. The multi-lingual center organizes activities by minority group. This is helpful but in need of growth. Parents are not proportionally represented by language or ethnicity.
  - Parents and involved in any postsecondary events. We do a lot of college tours. Parent nights, open houses or financial aid night. Last year had over a very large turnout. Meals, where we invite parents in for postsecondary discussions. [Liaison] is involved with Maine Parent Federation - had postsecondary school informational evening.
  - We have a very active parent group although they're not really active in GU. We have a GU parent night. In this LEA we have the added dilemma of English Language Learner families working late into night and evening and aren't able to attend evening events. We do what we can.
  - We have a FAFSA night, a PIE (People Interested in Education) night - parents and students come – we work individually with parents to complete FAFSA, work one-on-one if needed.
  - Parent involvement is sort of low. We do have parent booster groups, sometimes parent workshops, like about Financial Aid. Parents are good at attending events like music night, science fair, health fair. At beginning of year we had session on the Maine Lap Top Initiative MLTI – all parents were required to attend.
  - At X High School we have a – “parent connection.” Volunteers get info to other parents. Help with fund raising. At Y school, parents are key. Students do student led conference – they must have a parent present to receive grade. Not sure how it works at the other high schools in our LEA.
  - On a quarterly basis we have a "grades and grub" night. Also have open houses. At student led conferences parents are required to attend. On financial aid nights we get 90% to 100% attendance. We use PowerSchool to have parents access grades, to send notices home, notices about award ceremonies etc.
  - We have a financial aid night. Also, people from business community come in to talk about money issues, insurance, etc.
  - Parents attend GEAR UP dinner meetings, especially around the college application and financial aid piece. They're also involved around student led conferences. Directly involved in goal setting – twice a year – fall and spring.
  - At first of year meet we with freshmen parents, also have parent teacher conferences, student led conferences. On our website principal and superintendent have an open door policy, [liaison's] contact with parents is very important and happens on an as-needed basis.
  - We have student led conferences, send home informational letters. Our local TV channel puts out information for us. We have open houses, class demonstration night, financial aid night in December. Parents come into the guidance office for help.
  - For seniors we have parent night at beginning of year. Faculty presents about what to expect as seniors, what senior classes are like, what expectations there are. The GEAR UP person talked about scholarships, FAFSA. As principal, I talked about college applications, transcript requests, getting recommendations. We do the same with Freshmen, getting them oriented.
  - Financial Aid nights – people come from FAME to work with parents. Regional night - talk about the application process, what parents can expect. Nuts and bolts issues for parents.

**<sup>11</sup> Non-redundant responses to Question 8: How are the GEAR UP grant administrators doing administering the grant?<sup>11</sup>**

- I'm thrilled with what they do. I particularly like their style of leadership. Always offering help, always offering professional development. Most recently they've offered suggestions as to how to boost the annual plan. And although their recommendations were strong they were delivered in a respectful and collaborative way.
- [Administrator] is the only one I've met. She's a great resource. Good guidance, helped us focus on how to get to the outcomes we wanted.
- They're doing a good job.
- They're doing well. [Administrator] is always available, very responsive. An administrator and RTAC met with us - very helpful, resourceful.
- O' my God! They're doing a great job - offered assistance working the annual plan. Can't say enough good about them.
- Their communication is outstanding – offer supports all the time. Usually more than we take them up on. They keep us informed on what's available for professional development. I've been quite impressed. The regional workshop they did with guidance counselors was exceptional.
- Doing good job – very helpful in getting what we need.

related to the GEAR UP grant administration. Overwhelmingly and to the person, everyone interviewed sang the praises of the GEAR UP administrators. They were particularly pleased with the responsiveness of the team, the speed with which any and all questions were answered, the degree to which they were willing to work with them one-on-one on their annual plans, and the support provided to help them align LEA goals with those of the GEAR UP program. Respondents found the grant administrators very resourceful and knowledgeable about ways to help them access other resources having to do with post-secondary school and to integrate these resources into their current way of doing things. They were also pleased with the degree of professional development the team offered and the willingness of the team to meet with them in-person whenever necessary.

**11. Please describe specifically or provide examples of what supports the program administrators provide that work for you. Which ones don't?**<sup>12</sup>

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- Doing fine.
  - Doing great job. Rarely see them. Working hard, have interest of student in mind, very willing to offer professional development and willing to help out with that.
  - Fine. Have had no issues.
  - Fine job as far as I'm concerned. Open line of communication. They do their best. Our secretary always in contact with [administrator].
  - I work with an administrator and RTAC and someone from the Maine Parent Federation. They have a full understanding of what's needed, how to create an action plan, they're helpful with ideas, how to involve parents.
  - Very well. They keep us well informed especially via email.
  - Ok as far as I can see.
  - We met with them about 3 weeks ago, talked about the annual plan, what we're doing. Trying to do a good job. They give us good input.
  - Every meeting I've had with any of them has been positive.

**<sup>12</sup> Non-redundant responses to Question 11. Please describe specifically or provide examples of what supports the program administrators provide that work for you. Which ones don't?**

- We're looking at ideas, incorporating parents into financial aid night, how to get parents who had been through the process to work with new ones.
- Constant contact via email and phone are key. On a regular basis they work closely with us. Really a constant in the program.
- Our strongest support is [RTAC] Not only for GEAR UP but also with MELMAC – she coached us as surrogate – previously we had been two years without a coach. MELMAC asked her to be coach. She also became active in follow-through committee – facilitated a meeting where issues were discussed. Volunteered to help resolve issues. She's been huge help.
- They offered to help with annual plan, they provide support when I have questions about financial aid, student eligibility – always right on top of it. Very responsive.
- We're always kept in the loop in terms of upcoming events. Also with the plan, they're really good about that.
- The first three years we had the GEAR UP program were difficult. There wasn't a good fit between the needs of the program and the person I put in charge at our school. I sat with the GEAR UP administrators and asked for help. They had already given it a lot of thought and told me I needed to make GEAR UP part of student services, guidance, and that I needed someone who understands college-going culture. Based on their recommendation I went out and advertised and got the right person. Since then GEAR UP has been something I've enjoyed being a part of. Now I can sit back and let the program run smoothly.
- Have asked several times for help with the data base, inputting data - always gotten what I needed. Also, working with [administrator] with invoices was helpful, as was their help with re-designing LEA plan in a way that makes it pertinent to us. The original submitted plan, while well-written, didn't pertain to what we were doing.
- Just the fact that they're in touch with us on regular basis keeps us connected.
- Last year at X High School we had the PSAT for sophomores and juniors. GEAR UP brought in a team to discuss personal learning groups, community outreach; also did a personality inventory of some sort with freshmen, showing them how they related with others.
- They communicate with us often through email. They are very nice, very responsive, usually very prompt with replies. New webinars they put on are working quite well. They make themselves available when we need them - very helpful.
- Said they'd help getting transportation to visit college campuses or attend college fairs.
- They came on site and looked at our action plan and helped us develop a college access team – spent four hours – they had protocol that was very well utilized. What they don't have, they know where to get it. Know how to meet needs.
- I appreciate emails from them that keep us abreast of what's going on. If there's something we need to get out, they send emails to remind us. They remind us when things are due. Really keep us informed.
- We just really appreciate it when they come to visit. We value their comments.

12. ***Has the administration of the GEAR UP program improved over the past two years?***<sup>13</sup>

- a. **If yes, how?**
- b. **If no, what you would like to see changed?**

13. ***How well have the GEAR UP goals and objectives been incorporated into your daily school practice?***<sup>14</sup> Overall, respondents indicated they felt the GEAR UP goals were very well integrated into their daily school practice.

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- Talked about our annual plan, went over goals – it helped for them to go over them with us. Offers of support regarding parent night. Overall, they make sure everything is going ok – help on data entry. Trinkets last year weren't much help. Much better this year.
  - They put on workshops to help us make the connection between higher education and our professional development needs.

<sup>13</sup> ***Non-redundant responses to Question 12: Has the administration of the GEAR UP program improved over the past two years? If yes, how?***

- More electronic communication than previously.
- They provide a good service.
- They've become more familiar with what we expect from them. Doing a great job. They keep trying to make it easier for us. Keep thinking of ways to make liaison's jobs easier.
- Yes, we know each other better. Continuity is much better - so is communication.
- They're planning things better, like on-line meetings. That's new this year. Also, webinars.
- Absolutely!
- Continuity provided.
- Definitely improved – initially the program lacked direction. When I asked if I would get training someone said, "This is GEAR UP, you're on your own." Reports had little meaning or relevance to what was going on, more like boilerplate – not very communicative. Then everything started coming together – first with [administrator] Then [administrator] was hired and that gave us one person to go to for questions. Then RTAC came on board. Then I began to get a better understanding of how the pieces all fit together.
- Explain things quite well. Just had a meeting last week went well.
- Helping get the plan working for all three schools was very helpful. This year there's a more cohesive effort by all three schools. They seem to be working together on this. People very helpful.
- The number of times we've seen them throughout the year has improved.
- They're more aware of our needs, very sensitive about what our needs are.
- Communication has gotten stronger – get all GEAR UP news, they touch base with new ideas. The webinars they started this fall are great.

***What would you like to see changed?***

- My only concern now is the new cohort of students. I'm worried about having the students without being able to offer anything in the way of a scholarship.
- I'd like to be in charge of the grant.

<sup>14</sup> ***Non-redundant responses to Question 13: How well have the GEAR UP goals and objectives been incorporated into your daily school practice?***

- Its part of our guidance program, career exploration – at about 70% of where I'd like to be.
- They've been crucial to helping us focus. Creates student aspirations.
- Probably great deal. Literacy is now our main focus, also part of teacher evaluation. Math preparation for postsecondary school has become the focus in math – home room advocate spends time 2 days a week helping students work on their portfolios. SAT prep in spring meets twice a week with juniors. We also have a "sustained silent reading" program for 20 minutes, twice a week - books, magazines, no laptops.
- We don't have a high school. We have [liaison] – her sole job is to work with students and families to improve graduation rates, support students however she can. She gets additional tutors if needed, etc.
- With addition of [liaison] the goals have been integrated fairly well.
- Probably 100% - the program has even evolved to other kids. The goals are so ingrained that the culture's spread. We provide the same services to all kids. The only difference is that the GEAR UP kids have the scholarship money.
- Quite heavily. [Liaison] has related strongly to school goals. In our LEA, the opening of a career center has been huge and this is related to GEAR UP.
- Totally are!
- Been incorporated very well, very efficiently.
- Very much. High school X has a very college-bound culture. At high school Y, coaching is done at a weekly advisory session. At [city], there is a strong awareness being created about college. Guidance counselors go to freshmen and sophomore classes, explaining about college and how to prepare.

**14. If a stranger were to visit your GEAR UP schools, what might he/she see in terms of visible artifacts to indicate that a college-going culture exists in your school. Please provide an example (e.g., Our students wear t-shirts that read, "Ask me where I'm going!")**<sup>15</sup> Responses to this question varied from college-focused bulletin boards, posters, resource

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- Pretty much 100%. Personal Learning Plans, advisor/advisee sessions, senior seminar, all seniors have to apply to college, we have a senior exhibition (seniors are required to do a project and produce a research paper to present to their peers and advisors) – they all meet with guidance to talk about plans, college visits. They receive a grade for it.
  - Right up tippy top on that. Talk all the time about aspirations, getting grades up, furthering their education.
  - Every kid needs to be college ready. Right in line with GEAR UP goals. They fit in nicely, and are understood by every kid. Having GEAR UP person to be in constant touch with kids if very useful. Also, we do college visits in spring and in May.
  - Between 8 and 9 on a scale of 10 – multi faceted, availability of education on line, advanced placement college outreach center. Overachievers are able to take languages through Rosetta Stone.
  - College information, financial aid information, grades, all that stuff has become integrated.
  - GEAR UP goals fit really well with what we're trying to do.

<sup>15</sup> **Non-redundant responses to Question 14. If a stranger were to visit your GEAR UP schools what might he/she see in terms of visible artifacts to indicate that a college-going culture exists in your school. Please provide an example (e.g. Our students wear t-shirts that read, "Ask me where I'm going!")**

- You'd see bulletin boards, a rigorous curriculum, how we approach every kid – you wouldn't spend 5 minutes without recognizing it. We have the highest minority student population per capita – and we have support that works with everyone. Have MELMAC team to increase postsecondary school planning – a certificate program, information on the military etc.
- SAT prep signage is visible, college visits are posted, notices for when colleges are visiting, a busy Career, College and Aspirations Center, two places where students can peruse college applications, FAFSA forms etc.
- You'd see a *Touch the future* class – where students do applications, complete scholarship applications, letters of recommendation, prepare their exit exhibition. Advisor/advisee program. The GEAR UP office has big poster and is very welcoming, our GEAR UP person also does tutoring.
- We don't have a high school here but [liaison] goes over the goals with each student. Gets posters from colleges, etc..
- We have brochures, activities are provided through the university extension, the United Technology Center discusses career and technical education opportunities – for K-8. For [high school], a whole host of schedules, brochures, applications college posters. That stuff stood out when I went to a [high school] Gear UP meeting.
- Bulletin boards, literature we send out to students, announcements of meetings, schedule, [liaison] has a constant presence, the guidance office has open doors, our GEAR UP person is very visible – has office in library.
- We have a Career center, announcements of college reps coming to visit, signs up all over, gap-year programs for students who want to take a year off, a lot of supports around that. Bulletin board showing where last year's seniors went to college.
- College Career center is focused on postsecondary school. Guidance office has an array of schools that kids are getting into. As kids apply, their names get posted in guidance. All kids at high school X take college prep curriculum.
- They'd see college posters in corridors, bulletin board on financial aid availability, scholarships availability; above each class room door there's a pennant from colleges where the teacher graduated – it gets announced over the loud speaker when a student gets accepted to college.
- Every kid has access to all college courses – we do no tracking in HS. Have advisory program that cultivates notion of going to college. Advisors meet with advisees every other day – talk about goals, where they are in meeting goals. Don't see small classes of kids that have been separated out as low achievers. On walls, information about colleges, bulletin boards for GEAR UP, due date notices for submission of college forms. In main foyer, list of kids going on to school and college where they've been accepted. GEAR UP program has added to the number of students going to college.
- I have a bumper sticker that says "Every kid is college ready." Our curriculum is built to prepare everyone for college. All students have to fill out college application.
- Outside the guidance office there's a poster of all seniors and the colleges they've been accepted to. Also posting for open houses for colleges and scholarship opportunities. Information about college is on our school website.
- You'd see a school that's orderly and clean with staff working to educate youth. Very well organized program. Our environment is very conducive to learning.
- We send kids to early college, we have displays of various colleges, have recruiters come in. We'll be doing financial aid, we have kids take the ASVAB (aptitude and interest test) – then take each kid after the test and go over interests and aptitudes.

spaces, conversations about college, college and career representative visitors, celebrations of success, postings on school websites, and more. Overall respondents were very proud of the efforts their school had made on behalf of creating a visible college-bound culture.

## Section Three - Recommendations

Based on the interviews with GEAR UP participants and conversations with program administrators, the following recommendations are suggested for improving the Maine GEAR UP program between now and the end of the program. Some of the recommendations are too ambitious to complete before the program ends. They are included here in order to keep a record to carry forward to the next GEAR UP grant.

- 1. Identify methods for improving college access team composition (This includes methods to increase parent, student, and middle school staff involvement in the LEA's annual plan and plan implementation process).** Based on the interviews conducted there was a noticeable lack of parent, student, and middle school staff participation in either the planning or implementation phase of the annual plan. While it is not clear why this is the case, the fact remains that only a single parent from a single LEA was an active part of a planning committee. We would like to see at least one parent, student, and middle school staff person on each annual plan committee. We believe it would not only enhance the substance of the plan but also provide improvement options that might not otherwise be offered. Likewise, in keeping with the idea of creating a sustainable college-bound culture, the idea of developing a *college access team* as opposed to a GEAR UP planning committee may encourage broader team composition.
  - 2. Identify methods for increasing parental involvement.** As mentioned above, despite the numerous initiatives LEAs have made to involve parents in their children's education, there was a sense from the conversations that none of the participants was truly satisfied with the amount of parent participation in their schools. Focus groups with parents and others might prove worthwhile in evolving innovative ways to involve parents. Likewise, the numerous activities listed here that were gleaned from interviews might be dispersed among the LEAs as options. The problem that one interviewee mentioned regarding many minority parents working long hours and evenings is also an issue in need of a solution.
  - 3. Identify ways to improve the use of the data made available to GEAR UP LEAs.** Although some of the LEAs are making use of the comparative data made available to them, it was clear from the interviews that many LEAs are not. We suspect this is partially due to a lack of training regarding how to read tables and how to work with data. We found this to be the case with school LEAs when the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) began requiring State Education Agencies to produce LEA profiles and to assign LEAs determination levels based on performance. A considerable amount of training was required to explain to LEAs how to read their profiles, and additional work was required to help them understand how to implement performance improvement plans. We believe a similar effort would prove to be worthwhile for GEAR UP participants. Regional workshops on understanding basic statistical concepts would be helpful, and the aim would be to help LEAs interpret the numerous types of data made available to them. Putting together a one-page profile for a single LEA that shows all the data available on the gearupmedata.org website would be a good starting point. Another reason for lack of data use in some LEAs is the absence of a LEA college
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- Walk down hallway – you would see posters, signs for seniors. In guidance office names of colleges where alumni have gone, announcements telling seniors as to what needs to be done, a file for every senior that includes a personal learning plan for college readiness. Once accepted, it's announced over loud speaker usually with a poem. Have advisor/advisee, learning labs twice a week (45 minutes), during that time seniors review and study *Six Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make*, work on applications FAFSA forms, meet with college reps.
  - You'll see several college magazines, brochures, GEAR UP posters up, several college posters up in café, intercom says when college recruiters are present every week. During senior exhibition you would see seniors doing a PowerPoint demo to a panel of eight. Usually very good experience for all concerned.
  - We post a list of colleges that are coming to recruit. We have pictures of all students who went to college and where they went. Our school's Civic, Social and Academic goals are posted. Our top ten scholars are posted. We have an increased number of students taking dual credit courses. Thirty-five dual credit courses are now offered and 110 students are taking them.

access team as mentioned in recommendation 1. LEA teams should be supported in collectively looking at their schools' data and how it should inform their annual LEA plans.

4. **Develop a fuller understanding of how students with disabilities are doing in the program.** The question here is whether students with special needs are given the tools they need to succeed in an environment where individual education plans (IEPs) will no longer be part of their education process. This recommendation involves seeking a greater understanding of what, if anything, will be needed to fill this gap.
5. **Continue to evolve ways in which LEAs can be made aware of and access the various and sundry resources available to them.** One group of comments heard time and again in the interviews was the resourcefulness of the GEAR UP administrators. Finding ways to transfer that knowledge and capacity to the LEA would go a long way toward enhancing the programs in a time of ever more limited resources.
6. **Develop a better sense of what's happening with learning in the classroom.** The question to be addressed here is whether the teaching methods being used are keeping up with the times and whether the latest in learning methods are being used. While this issue was not addressed in the interviews, it emerged as a question in interviews with administrative staff.
7. **Pursue the possibility of incorporating into the GEAR UP database administrative tracking tools that can be used by Maine Department of Education (MDOE) to ascertain whether the grant is being managed as planned.** The way MDOE manages the GEAR UP program is to contract with the Maine Support Network, the Maine Parent Federation, the Financial Authority of Maine, and every LEA that participates in the program. As part of this process, contractors are required to produce quarterly reports showing what they have done in the way of accomplishing the objectives of their contract. In these reports, progress is reported for both the process indicators in the contracts and the outcome indicators in the contracts. Progress on process indicators is reported as activities are carried out (e.g., "hosted a financial aid session for parents"). Progress on outcome indicators is reported annually in the Annual Performance Report. We believe this reporting process can be greatly simplified by adding the capacity to the GEAR UP database for posting those activities related to the process indicators. An events calendar, visitation schedule, GEAR UP notices, training schedules, and the like, are examples of process data currently posted elsewhere that could be centralized in the database. MDOE could then perform a desktop audit at any given time to determine if the provisions of the contract are being fulfilled. With regard to the outcome indicators, these results get tallied annually and are incorporated into the APR. However, the data are readily available in the form of tables for each participating LEA and can be audited by MDOE anytime. In short, developing the capacity to perform desk audits. The key point here is that the current process calls for a considerable amount of duplication of effort on the part of participating contractors. Implementing this recommendation could eliminate the need for quarterly reports, while simultaneously providing the same required information through a desk audit capacity for MDOE. The end result would simplify the contract administration and monitoring process.
8. **Identify ways in which what works in the GEAR UP model can be scaled up to other non-GEAR UP schools.** In the course of administering this program and working with individual school LEAs, numerous program elements (tools) have been identified that, when implemented, increase the degree to which students apply for and get accepted to college. We believe other non-GEAR UP schools could benefit from these tools if they were made available within MDOE. A corollary to this would be to connect and share with other college access programs in the State to identify and fill the gaps in services to low-income students.
9. **Identify ways to improve outreach to GEAR UP students who are now in college.** A major area of difficulty the GEAR UP program has faced is the inability to utilize funds and resources to obtain follow-up information on GEAR UP graduates. Simply knowing whether graduates have been successful in post-secondary school and obtained a degree would provide valuable information to the program. School staff also consistently request this data, as evident in evaluation interview question 4b above regarding what additional data reports would be helpful. This inability also prevents GEAR UP administrators from doing outreach to former GEAR UP students who are currently in college and connecting them with resources that exist on their campus. Identifying persistent mechanisms to improve outreach may help improve college graduation success (persistence) rates.