



GEAR UP

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs

Spring 2008

Hillsborough High School

Faces of Gear UP: Hillsborough High School Students Shine with Success

By Storie Miller

There has been much news lately about Florida's low graduation rates for Hispanic and African American students, but a program at Hillsborough High School (HHS) in Tampa Florida not only helps to ensure these students stay in school and graduate, it also provides support to ensure they meet all requirements to qualify for college opportunities.

This year, HHS graduates the first group of students completing the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). GEAR UP is a federal grant program that has been jointly funded by the Children's Board of Hillsborough County to increase the number of minority and low income students who are prepared to succeed in college.

Children typically enroll in 7th grade, and participate throughout their high-school years. GEAR UP provides case management services, in-class and after-school tutoring, Saturday program workshops for parents and students, college test prep classes, college field trips, and community volunteer activities; GEAR UP also awards college scholarships.

Recently, a select group of HHS students and case managers shared insights on their experiences in GEAR UP. The students profiled here have strong views about the program's positive influence on their thinking. Most had never considered the possibility of college; many are now weighing scholarship opportunities.

"If we're not eating or in class, we're in here."

Here for Jasmine Gray is the school's GEAR UP classroom where case managers are available for support and guidance throughout the day. Enrolling in the program in 6th grade at Memorial Middle School, high school junior Jasmine has taken rigorous advanced placement college courses for the last three years, and now ranks in the top 1% of her class.



"Jasmine is enthusiastic and a very involved young lady taking pride in her many extracurricular school and community based activities," said case manager Electa Davis. *"As she continues to excel academically, Jasmine has become a strong contender for the coveted position of Hillsborough High Class of 2009 valedictorian."*

When 12th grader **Gabriel Rodriguez** started participating in GEAR UP, he had no idea what to do beyond high school and didn't even consider college as a possibility. Now, after taking part in GEAR UP for the past three years, his senior year has been filled with exiting



news of his academic achievements, including testing out of his ESE designation, meeting all his graduation testing requirements early and getting early acceptance into Schiller International University. He will attend the campus in Madrid Spain to pursue his dream of going into diplomacy and having the opportunity to study abroad.

"Gabriel exemplifies what hard work and focus can do to overcome any academic obstacle one may have," said case manager Leslie Pagan. *"He is a wonderful example for his four younger siblings and his peers, especially students new to the US that may feel they cannot accomplish their dreams here."*

11th grader **Diana Torres** uses all the tools and resources available through the GEAR UP program. She enrolled in fall SAT Prep class run by KAPLAN; gets academic tutoring assistance when she needs it and attends Saturday program workshops with her mother. Diana's hard work has resulted in her being selected as one of the 2007/2008 GEAR UP scholarship recipients. Both she and her mother participated in the parent/student overnight college tour to FAMU and Florida State University in March 2007.





GEAR UP staff from left to right: Ms. Leslie-Ann Pagan, Ms. Ruby Joseph, Ms. Electa Davis, Dr. Joko Sengova, and Mr. Roderick Barnes

"I don't have words to tell how grateful I am," said Ms. Torres, who moved to the United States from Colombia. *"During our trip to Tallahassee, it was so nice to see how much the case managers get involved with the future of the kids. They provide connections, guidance, teach them how to find resources for scholarships and change the lives for the students. There should be a GEAR UP program in all high schools."*

Seniors **Breanna Smith** and **Malachi Adebayo** have also benefited from participation in GEAR UP's tutoring services and FCAT testing preparation. Breanna has been awarded a GEAR UP Florida Prepaid Scholarship and will attend Hillsborough Community College (HCC)/Ybor campus. Malachi will be attending the HCC/Dale Mabry campus through a Sallie Mae Fund scholarship.



"Breanna has proven herself as an outstanding student," said case manager Roderick Barnes.

"She possesses qualities that have contributed to the overall success of the students we serve and unselfishly gives of her time and energy to ensure that her peers are also successful in their education."

With a current district GPA of 3.2, Breanna also participates in the CDC of Tampa-Prodigy Program, Future Business Leaders of America, high school track, Champions of Christ, Girls Football, and Sophisticated Ladies.

AT HHS, Malachi is a member of Distinguished Gentlemen, Basketball and Track Teams. He recently received a "Most Valuable Player" award, and also provides leadership and mentoring services for younger students.

For more information about the GEAR UP program in Tampa, contact Ms. Ruby Joseph at 813-974-9339.

"Upon meeting Malachi, I was struck by his genuine desire to pursue his educational dream," said Mr. Barnes. Malachi has already determined that he wants to major in sociology and work in family social work.



Recently, Diana Torres brought several friends to the GEAR UP office to sign them up for next year. She was told there was a chance the program wouldn't be available because of funding issues. *"I really want Gear Up to be here my senior year,"* added Diana. *"All the seniors will be affected if we don't have that support."*

Diana, similar to Malachi, wants to be a child psychologist. Perhaps one day soon, they will play roles similar to the Gear Up staff—influencing youth in many positive ways and helping them achieve all that they can be.

"It has taken a lot of hard work," said director Ruby Joseph. *"We've had consistent support from Hillsborough High School administrators, teachers and support staff who've helped make Dr. Sengova's job as program manager go smoothly. They have all assisted Eloise Boterf, our parent liaison/mentoring coordinator in running an effective mentoring program. Our case managers should be proud of their dedication and the positive changes they have made in so many adolescent lives. We've also had lots of support from other staff who work on the USF campus. Kenyatta Daniel, our accountant and Cathy Maldonado, our data entry staff have provided necessary administrative support. It's been a true team effort."*



Hillsborough High School Principal Dr. William Orr has seen improvements in the GEAR UP students. He compared FCAT scores of GEAR UP students with a general group of students.

"After time in the GEAR UP program, kids did better on testing," said HHS Principal Dr. William Orr. *"That tells me something is working, and if you can get them to perform better, that gets them better prepared for college."*