REVIEW:
THE NEW JERSEY GEAR UP STATE PROJECT

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- New Jersey GEAR UP is fulfilling its mission and goals as described in its 2005 federal grant proposal.

- New Jersey GEAR UP, upon receiving its 2005 grant, nearly doubled its enrollment and extended its services to sixth grade students; in doing so, it maintained its high quality level of service and met or exceeded its enrollment and retention goals.

- The New Jersey GEAR UP model is multi-dimensional and relies upon collaboration among students, parents, schools, peers, community mentors, and advisers—in essence, it coordinates home, school and community action to raise disadvantaged students’ life expectations and academic achievement.

- New Jersey GEAR UP has established exemplary ties with related educational and community agencies in New Jersey, including the State Department of Education. GEAR UP is aligned with school reform efforts and has secured two supplementary grants, one a direct grant promoting math education in schools served by GEAR UP and the other, in consort with the State Chamber of Commerce, cultivating good work and study habits among participants.

- GEAR UP student participant performance is excellent, with progress evident in standardized test scores, high school graduation, and college/university enrollment.

- The report recommends program improvements in three areas: leadership, staff development, and program promotion.
II. BACKGROUND

New Jersey GEAR UP is working to improve the educational prospects of low-income students in five of New Jersey’s most seriously distressed urban school districts. The project has established a well documented record of outstanding work in disadvantaged communities, aligning with several other programs offered by the State and private entities to raise the level of academic achievement among these children. The first New Jersey GEAR UP grant was awarded in 1999 to the Commission on Higher Education, which partnered in this effort with the New Jersey State Department of Education, the New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, the state Educational Opportunity Fund, and seven colleges and universities.

This report follows upon my earlier review of New Jersey GEAR UP, submitted in February, 2005. For that reason, this update will not revisit the more extensive background material included in the earlier work. That report surveyed the entire GEAR UP landscape, commenting on all major dimensions and activities of which the program is comprised. This paper will be brief, and will revisit only those elements specifically requested for review by program management. An outline of the items requested is attached.

This report is based upon quantitative and qualitative data supplied by program management as well as observations collected via visits to all program sites and interviews with site directors, school counselors, and student participants.

Since my earlier review, New Jersey GEAR UP has received an expansion of its funding, allowing it to nearly double its student capacity, from 1,100 students to 2,000. The expanded grant was awarded in 2005 for a period extending to 2011. At present, the total amount of the grant is $3,499,116 per year, plus matching funds.

Program Service Area and Demographics

New Jersey GEAR UP serves 28 schools: 17 elementary/middle schools and 11 high schools (the number of schools has been modified slightly since the grant award due to school restructuring under No Child Left Behind). The managing postsecondary institutions are located at Trenton, Camden, Newark, and Jersey City, along with the recent addition of Paterson, based at Passaic County Community College. (For a list of all target schools and postsecondary institutions, see Attachments B and C) The school population in the targeted sites is overwhelmingly minority, African American and Latino, and in all of these schools, 50% or more of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. In addition, high school graduation for students at these schools has historically been significantly lower than the State average. Overall college enrollment rates for students at these schools has historically been significantly lower than the State average. Overall college enrollment rates for the targeted schools are not available, although the college/university enrollment rate for low-income students in New Jersey is low. And these communities are among the lowest in average income of any in New Jersey.

Program Model and New Developments

The core elements of the New Jersey GEAR UP model have remained for the most part consistent since its inception. In terms of theory of action, it is a comprehensive college preparation program. Dimensions of the model include:

- cultivation of high academic and life expectations,
- support for academic rigor within the school and via supplementary classes and activities,
Review: New Jersey GEAR UP State Project

- establishment of a social network built around college expectations, involving the student participant, parents, teachers, peers, mentors, and academic coaches,
- use of data to set numerical and qualitative goals and to measure progress toward goals,
- financial support for students to sustain program engagement, including financial aid to pay college costs, and
- P-16 alignment, linking middle school, high school, and college curricula.

The model is research based. Its core elements have been identified as critical to achievement through research conducted by the College Pathways group, by The Education Trust, by the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) at the University of Southern California, by the American Youth Policy Forum and other research and policy agencies. This model is considered optimal for educational intervention to promote higher student achievement.

The “multi-dimensional” orientation of this and all such programs means that management of the effort requires orchestration of a host of different student experiences aimed to produce optimal outcomes. It also requires that a variety of different entities—schools, parents, peers, State and federal financial aid sources, and others—share the vision of the program and contribute necessary elements. The New Jersey GEAR UP effort has been remarkably successful in building precisely this structure, enlisting State and federal financial aid sources, and collaborating with schools via local agencies and Abbott district services, social networking via peer ties and community agencies, and parental involvement.

Participants follow a 20-week after-school/Saturday program and a six-week all-day summer program, each of which include tutoring, test preparation, mentoring, college field trips, assistance with college admission, and financial aid. There are also services to parents, such as workshops, opportunities to attend college field trips, award ceremonies, and opportunities to participate on parent advisory boards—some formal, others less so—to help guide the project. Finally, the project serves teachers from the target schools through workshops requested by the principal for his or her institution and through a multi-year mathematics initiative.

New Jersey GEAR UP’s receipt of expansion funds has allowed the program to extend its service model to additional students in the sixth grade, as research indicates is an optimal time for intervention. Other new dimensions of the model include continuing recruitment of new students entering the program at all academic levels, while still emphasizing retention of continuing enrollees.

The program has also concentrated scholarship funding on students who participate from seventh grade onwards (incentivizing persistence and retention), and who graduate from the program and high school, continuing on to postsecondary education in a New Jersey institution. Total eligibility is capped at eight semesters. The scholarship amount equals the annual Pell grant maximum, per the GEAR UP legislation.

The Role of the College Bound Grant Program

To further characterize the program organization, one additional note on the structure and history of the New Jersey GEAR UP program is needed. The program was built using the pre-existing New Jersey College Bound Grant Program as a base. College Bound is a state-funded project, initiated in 1986. It is similar in orientation and objectives to the NJ GEAR UP program.

II. BACKGROUND
Coordination of the College Bound and GEAR UP funding streams (as well as institutional and private funding) occurs at each campus site. Both GEAR UP and College Bound are administered by the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education, including oversight and evaluation of both programs.

About 450 student participants are designated “College Bound only,” which indicates that they do not attend a New Jersey GEAR UP target school.

**New Partnerships with Industry and Community**

Among the most critical elements of the comprehensive model employed by New Jersey GEAR UP is academic rigor, as expressed in the academic support efforts the program employs and its direct links to curriculum and teaching in the schools where the students are enrolled. In addition, for minority and low-income students, links to the job market are also extremely valuable. Two grants from which GEAR UP recently benefited represent major contributions to these two elements.

First, GEAR UP applied for and received a grant from the NCCEP/AT&T Grants Promoting Excellence and Innovation and Education for $38,260 in 2006 ($60,260 with matching funds) for the purpose of training teachers participating in the GEAR UP Algebra Institute in Abbott school districts. This is a particularly significant accomplishment in several respects. It embodies the “comprehensive” ethos of NJ GEAR UP, in that it contributes to academic rigor in local schools, cements relationships with teachers and upgrades their skills, while also aligning with the business community. Teachers participating in the grant program acquire skills important to instruction of AP Calculus and AP Statistics. They also receive 1-2 weeks of professional development contributing to their command of algebraic reasoning, data analysis, and rational numbers. Obviously, these skills are enduring and benefit all students now in these schools as well as students who will enroll in future.

By leveraging AT&T and GEAR UP funds, this teacher professional development effort extends the reach of the program throughout the Abbott districts. It also aligns instruction, via cooperation with the New Jersey Department of Education, to statewide mathematics standards.

Second, New Jersey GEAR UP has partnered with the State Chamber of Commerce’s Business Coalition for Educational Excellence and its “Learn More Do More Earn More” project in New Jersey service communities. The Chamber received a grant from the Kellogg foundation to expand its efforts addressing the practical needs of students entering the workforce. The program seeks to increase students’ knowledge of mathematics and other rigorous coursework, business software and applications, and financial literacy. It also emphasizes the importance of attendance and punctuality, both in terms of schooling and work. The GEAR UP alliance with the agency and its program reinforces for students (from a highly credible source) the message of high academic expectations; it strengthens the schools where the students are enrolled; and it solidifies community bonds that activate civic engagement.

**New Jersey GEAR UP Situated in State and National Context**

As the preceding illustrations demonstrate, New Jersey GEAR UP, as a multi-dimensional model, is connecting with other critical entities whose roles will contribute to the success of enrolled students. But one of the most important of these organizations is of course the schools GEAR UP students attend. To what extent can GEAR UP depend upon quality curriculum and instruction to provide the academic foundation necessary for high achievement?
New Jersey, in 2005, was one of the first 13 states to join the National Governors Association in endorsing the American Diploma Project (ADP) standards for a rigorous curriculum. The ADP brings together each state’s governor, state superintendent of education, business leaders, and college and university leaders to address issues of academic standards, assessments, curriculum, and alignment between learning outcomes and job and higher education requirements. As a part of this initiative, New Jersey has launched a very ambitious plan for the State to:

1) build the public will for high school reform,
2) align high school standards with college admission and workforce entry requirements, endorsing American Diploma Project guidelines,
3) redesign the statewide system of assessment, and
4) build a student level database to track individuals’ educational progress throughout their enrollment.

This effort is called “New Jersey High School Redesign,” and the Executive Director of the Commission on Higher Education, who also is responsible for GEAR UP, serves on the steering committee, ensuring close collaboration between the two entities.

The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee and other groups are taking steps to implement the vision expressed above. These steps will likely include such goals as:

1. Align New Jersey high school curriculum and graduation requirements to those of postsecondary education and the workforce;
2. Implement an efficient and effective assessment system that measures student achievement, provides data to address student learning and performance gaps, and aligns with the expectations of higher education and the workplace;
3. Recruit, support, and retain a sustainable supply of highly effective teachers and school leaders, with particular attention to “high need” schools and “high need” subject areas;
4. Redesign high schools as learning communities that utilize personalized learning approaches; and,
5. Establish a council composed of a diverse group of key stakeholders to create a seamless, aligned system of public education in New Jersey.

Changes to assessments and course requirements could affect high school students as early as the 2008-2009 school year.

Another element of New Jersey’s effort to improve alignment between the various levels of education is transfer legislation, which was signed into law by the Governor in September 2007. The legislation will promote seamless transfer of New Jersey community college associate degree graduates into baccalaureate degree programs at public four-year colleges and universities throughout the state. Under the new law, each public higher education institution will enter into a collective statewide transfer agreement in consultation with the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and the New Jersey Presidents’ Council.

Taking into consideration these revisions to broad state policy, and focusing on the GEAR UP program model, it is clear that as New Jersey progresses on the High School Redesign initiatives, GEAR UP is extremely well positioned to make a substantial contribution to this effort and to see its students benefit from the changes underway. The opportunity for synchronization of effort is outstanding.
III. STUDENT OUTCOMES

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**S/Ts**  
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**TOT**  
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**SUMMARY, NJ GEAR UP STATE PROJECT, 2005-2011**

**ACTUAL RECRUITMENT/RETENTION OUTCOMES**

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**TOT**  
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**% recruit % retained % recruit % retained % recruit % retained % recruit % retained % recruit % retained**

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<td>12th</td>
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III. STUDENT OUTCOMES
III. STUDENT OUTCOMES

Recruitment and Retention

As the chart on page 6 indicates, despite very ambitious goals New Jersey GEAR UP has either met or very nearly met its recruitment targets over the past two years as it has expanded. The program’s promotional and identification efforts are succeeding. But more importantly, retention is extremely good, testifying to the perceived effectiveness of efforts as judged by students continuing to participate.

Student Achievement of Educational Goals

Once enrolled, the most significant indicators of the success of this program are participants’ achievement of their educational goals. On three significant measures, participating students exceed the performance of their peers in comparison groups. Most notable of these figures are the graduation rates for twelfth graders and the college enrollment of participants within six months of graduation. On the first measure, there is more than a twenty-five point difference (see Chart 1 below). On the second measure, the rate is nearly double: NJ GEAR UP participants enrolled in college within six months of graduation at rates of 67.3% and 70.7% in 2005 and 2006 respectively, as compared to the statewide rate for students from low-income families of 36.1% in 2005 (2006 data has not yet been published). Likewise, the difference in SAT performance is great: in 2006, roughly a 50 point difference on the verbal score and well over 50 points on the math score (see Chart 2 on next page).

Chart 1

Graduation rate of 12th-grade NJ GEAR UP participants compared to their peers in the target schools, 2005 & 2006
Student and Parent Program Assessments

New Jersey GEAR UP measures, on a regular basis, student and parent levels of knowledge about college preparation and the academic and financial resources required for postsecondary enrollment and success. The most recent surveys conducted of these two groups revealed that expectations for completing the baccalaureate degree were very high, over 80%. Almost three quarters of all parents reported that they had participated in GEAR UP events and most all parents indicated that they had discussed college attendance with their children. In addition, over 70% said that they felt they would be able to acquire financial resources necessary for enrollment.

Among students, the most important findings were that 83% felt they were more likely to qualify and enroll in postsecondary education as a result of their GEAR UP participation and 60% felt that their grades had improved as a result of the GEAR UP program.

Assessment Scores of GEAR UP Students

Charts 3 and 4 display GEAR UP students who scored proficient or above on the GEPA (Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment) and HSPA (High School Proficiency Assessment), two New Jersey state assessments of achievement in core academic disciplines: language arts, mathematics, and science. The charts also compare GEAR UP participant performance with that of their peers in the target schools, and the charts also show trends over time.

In every single year, in every single discipline, GEAR UP students outpace their peers, in some instances by great amounts. The trend lines show increasingly higher performance, especially on the GEPA and in mathematics on the HSPA. What these data indicate is that the program is having an increasingly greater effect on participants, possibly influenced by the numerous other complementary initiatives now underway in New Jersey education, a pattern that may be producing synergistic outcomes for students.
III. STUDENT OUTCOMES

Chart 3

GEPA = Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment

Chart 4

HSPA = High School Proficiency Assessment (11th grade test)
IV. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

• New Jersey GEAR UP has achieved several important objectives since my review in 2005. The program has expanded its size; it has not only maintained a generally high level of quality in the program, but has added new elements, such as stronger ties to the business community and links to a variety of other educational innovations in the state that are essential for broad-scale change. Although individual sites display distinctive individual approaches, the central organization is cultivating both quality control as well as exercising leadership in emphasizing core goals.

• In its introduction of College Board services for test preparation, GEAR UP has made a choice that is welcomed by local schools, strengthening the program/school partnership, and showing good results with students.

• GEAR UP’s record in raising students’ proficiency levels on the GEPA and HSPA is notable. In particular the upward trend in student performance on these exams and the benefits to local schools make this one of the program’s greatest strengths.

• The program’s new site at Paterson is extraordinarily strong. Its development of curricular structure is unique and outstanding. There is clear evidence of academic planning and execution that reflects deep understanding of the academic disciplines, while also accommodating a variety of different student learning styles. It raises the level of academic seriousness on the part of the program, introducing a new level of structure and rigor that should be shared throughout the sites.

• Some K12 where program participants are enrolled continue to present challenges, struggling with deep-rooted organizational and instructional issues.

• A new challenge for the program is the growth in the number of undocumented students and parents, making educational planning for these students vastly more difficult and limiting options the program can provide.

• New Jersey GEAR UP benefits from an experienced and extremely dedicated set of staff. Directors generally are knowledgeable about their communities, deeply committed to community betterment, excellent educators, good managers, and admirable role models for the students they mentor. As site directors mature in their posts, however, it is important to maintain both staff and program vitality and to spur innovation and creative thinking through active employee and program review and renewal efforts.

• Since my review in 2005, the program has made good progress in terms of data collection and management. Further consolidation of data bases to allow programs to systematically chart progress for individual students and for groups, along with a professional development program to assist managers in accessing data would be useful. Another step in this direction is to introduce a series of easily accessible reports to guide directors in a regular and timely pattern in assessing individual site outcomes.

• The question posed by program management regarding the extent of NJ GEAR UP’s influence on students’ decisions to enroll in rigorous courses cannot be assessed at this time. With the documentation available now, I am not able to ascertain the extent of the impact of NJ GEAR UP alone on this factor, as opposed to the multiple other factors that could and do exert influence,
IV. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

such as school placement policies, student performance on standardized tests used for placement, and parent and student individual choice.

- New Jersey GEAR UP displays clear and tangible evidence of meeting and surpassing the expressed goals of the national GEAR UP program. The New Jersey program is raising the number of low-income, disadvantaged students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary programs. It is raising the number who accomplish this goal, and is doing so using a highly structured and focused sequence of activities that strengthen students’ skills in core academic disciplines, promote aspirations for college, and raise students’ and parents’ knowledge of academic skills and enabling tools such as financial aid and college admissions. This conclusion is supported by the data the program collects on participant recruitment, retention, academic success and college enrollment as well as by interviews and observation conducted for this evaluation among program staff and directors as well as student participants.

- New Jersey GEAR UP is contributing significantly to school reform in New Jersey, supplementing school curriculum, exposing students to new instructional models within secondary academic disciplines, adding informed resources to school programs, and cementing local community alliances that – collectively – can leverage educational resources synergistically to higher levels of performance.
V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

1. **Leadership**: The energy and ferment evident for reform and improvement in the New Jersey educational community present a unique opportunity for the State’s GEAR UP program. It embodies the principles and practices toward which the reform movement is moving: collaboration and linkage among educational organizations, higher levels of aspiration and achievement, data driven decisions, and direction, and higher levels of achievement through engagement of all sectors of communities and all elements of students’ lives. GEAR UP operates across different levels of the educational pipeline, from sixth grade into higher education, focusing on the same transition points as the state’s educational reform and standards movement.

The services GEAR UP is providing its participants are decisive in their lives. GEAR UP should seek ways of enlarging its efforts, seeking to reach a greater number of students in the communities it serves and playing a larger role in statewide policy discussions of educational improvement. Its activities not only serve as a laboratory for testing various models and approaches, but it is also developing an infrastructure on which the reform movement might capitalize as it moves forward.

2. **Staff Development**: Central organization of GEAR UP has matured and developed since my last review. It has greater resources with which to assist sites and greater depth of experience and vision available to benefit local sites. Also, the addition of the new Paterson site with its strong and innovative curricular orientation presents an opportunity for enrichment of all sites. Statewide leadership should commit to an enhanced program of staff development, one that will allow comparison and development of new tools and techniques for performing work. But most importantly, directors and senior staff in the program should be provided a forum where vision, educational expertise, and approaches can be shared, both among existing directors and staff, but also with the guidance and advice of topical experts. The program may want to consider enlisting directors and staff in an in-depth comparative review of organizational culture among sites, beginning a series of seminars on topics such as supervision, leadership, and vision. The aim of these activities is to prompt creativity, energy, and innovation and the sharing of existing expertise.

3. **Program Promotion**: New Jersey GEAR UP has an outstanding story to tell. It is accomplishing remarkable goals, but it is not developing the information and communication resources to make that evident to all the public entities which can and do support the effort. Lack of organized promotional efforts also hampers the program’s ability to exercise statewide influence in the reform efforts now underway. I recommend that data on program ethos, activities, but most importantly goals and outcomes, be developed into a set of messages and materials that can influence policy makers and elicit broader community support. This influence can help GEAR UP to play a stronger role in statewide policy discussions and allow it to serve in a “laboratory” capacity for educational initiatives the State is considering.
Order of Final Report [info in brackets refers to questions below]

I. Executive Summary
II. Background [brief reference to previous evaluation & new NJ GU grant; question #1]
III. State and National Climate [question #1]
IV. Program Performance [questions 2-5]
V. Conclusions [question 6]
VI. Recommendations [question 7]

Questions to be Answered in Final Report and Documentation Provided by CHE

1) Update previous report ONLY in areas indicated by CHE. The updated portions will be much reduced from the previous report. Report period is 2005-2007, 1st 2 years of new grant cycle. Include references to emerging trends and issues at the national and state level.
   A. Changes to NJ GEAR UP
   B. Emerging issues/trends, state and national

2) Include data that we provide to you and indicate how the project has performed in key areas, such as GEPA scores, HSPA scores, college enrollment, high school graduation, and SAT scores.

3) Based on programs’ reports of student performance by grade during summer 07, and subsequent course enrollment during the next academic year, to what extent is NJ GEAR UP influencing students’ decisions to enroll in rigorous courses and preparing them to succeed in those courses?

4) Assess the extent to which each campus program has implemented the College Board SAT College Readiness program in their target schools and provide recommendations for greater implementation if needed.

5) What has the program’s progress been in achieving the recommendations included in the previous report?

6) In general, to what extent is the NJ GEAR UP State Project achieving the goals of the proposal and the goals of the national GEAR UP program?

7) Provide recommendations for improved outcomes during the next two years.
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<td>Trenton Central HS, including West and North campuses</td>
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New Jersey GEAR UP State Project
Managing Postsecondary Institutions and Locations

- Paterson – Passaic County Community College
- Jersey City – New Jersey City University
- Newark – The Consortium for Pre-College Education at the New Jersey Institute of Technology
- Trenton – Mercer County Community College
- Camden – Rowan University