

**REMARKS TO THE NEW JERSEY COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION BY
MICHELLE JOHNSON, DIRECTOR OF NJ GEAR UP, OCTOBER 28, 2005**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Dr. Oswald, and Commissioners, for allowing me to speak to you today.

My name is Michelle Johnson, and I am the director of the New Jersey GEAR UP State Project. As you can see from the cover memo, the Commission has just been awarded *its second grant under the federal GEAR UP initiative*. GEAR UP has been in existence for seven years. Its goal is to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

The new grant, which began on September 1st, is for \$20.9 million dollars over six years. That amount is matched dollar for dollar by contributions from the state and the participating colleges, universities, and schools, for a total grant amount of nearly \$42 million dollars. This is an increase of 65 percent above the previous grant, and, as you might expect, we're going to face some new challenges and opportunities. But before I tell you too much about the new grant, let me highlight for you some of the successes from the first cycle, which ended this year.

The Commission memo indicates that I am going to tell you about the new grant goals. However, the grant goal is essentially the same as before: we're going to continue to work hard to prepare low-income for college success. We've just enhanced some of the ways we're going to go about it.

- The first grant served 1,861 students with comprehensive services, that is, approximately *250 hours* of support per student per year.
- As of last spring, **81.7 percent** of graduates from the NJ GEAR UP program had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education. Over 70 institutions, both in- and out-of-state, running the gamut from technical schools to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to Yale University, have enrolled NJ GEAR UP students since 2000.
- To offer you some perspective on this achievement, of 81.7 percent attending college. NJ GEAR UP students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch, the program's standard for determining "low-income" status. All students entered the program from public middle schools in distressed urban areas with high numbers of high school dropouts and low scores on most standardized tests. In fact, the schools were chosen for participation in the grant based on the severity of their academic need and high numbers of students in poverty. These and many other indicators point to a high risk of educational failure for these kids.
- Instead, they are enrolling in postsecondary education at **nearly double** the rate of low-income students across New Jersey. That's right: New Jersey leads the nation in the college participation rate of low-income students, at **43.7 percent**, and *NJ GEAR UP* students in New Jersey are enrolling at *81.7 percent*. GEAR UP students are actually pursuing postsecondary education at rates virtually *identical* to the rate of high-income students nationally, which was 80.1 percent according to the *Condition of Education 2005*. It is clear that the NJ GEAR UP combination of early and sustained academic and counseling support; teacher professional development; family support; and the offer of a college scholarship are making a significant difference in these students' college-going decisions.
- [These figures are from the *Condition of Education 2005, Table 20-1, Student Effort & Educational Progress* and Tom Mortenson's *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, December 2004.]
- There are also early indications that a substantial number of NJ GEAR UP students will persist in their studies and earn degrees. The GEAR UP scholarship, which is available to students who attend college in New Jersey, is most likely positively affecting students' persistence. However, too little

data are available at this time to report on persistence to degree. We will update you when that information becomes available.

- \$2.5 million dollars in scholarship funding was disbursed to students or put in trust for them during the first cycle. Overall, GEAR UP students could qualify for up to \$13,500 each in federal scholarship funding.
- During the second half of the first grant cycle, NJ GEAR UP consistently increased its numbers of students who scored “proficient” on all subject areas on the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) and the High School Proficiency Assessment, or HSPA. In each subject area, more NJ GEAR UP students scored “proficient” or “advanced proficient” than their peers in the target schools.
- As many as 70 percent of NJ GEAR UP students participate in the Commission’s Educational Opportunity Fund, or EOF, at the college level. The partnership between the two programs helps students continue to receive the academic, social, and leadership support that helped them gain entry to college.
- Hundreds of teachers in the GEAR UP target schools have earned professional development hours by participating in NJ GEAR UP events during the first grant period.
- In addition to students receiving direct, comprehensive services from GEAR UP, thousands of others from the target schools and districts have received tutoring, information about financial aid, and information about the importance of taking a rigorous high school curriculum.

Let me move on now to some of the changes and enhancements made to the program for the new cycle.

- The program will serve 29 middle and high schools in Camden, Jersey City, Newark, Trenton, and Paterson. This is an increase of 10 schools and one district – Paterson is the newest city to join the project.
- By year six, nearly 6,000 students will have participated in GEAR UP activities.
- NJ GEAR UP will now begin serving students in 6th grade, as opposed to 7th, as was done previously.
- The project has revamped its objectives to more concretely stress the importance of student success in courses that are linked to college entrance and success in college. These include Algebra and Chemistry. These goals will require more direct influence on students’ and districts’ curriculum decisions.
- Over \$6 million of the new grant award is allocated for scholarships, and students can qualify for as much as \$16,000 during their college experience in New Jersey.
- Seven colleges and universities, two state agencies, and four community agencies implement and support the project. The list of partners is in the handout you will soon receive. Passaic County Community College and the community agencies and businesses are the newest project partners.
- Students continue to be guaranteed eligibility for the state’s Educational Opportunity Fund.
- Through a developing partnership with the New Jersey Department of Education, teachers in all target schools will be provided professional development in content-based areas.
- A new grant goal is to provide online SAT preparation for all students in the participating high schools. When implemented, this initiative could reach over 17,000 high school students and would be available for study anywhere that the student has internet access, including in the classroom.

- The grant provides for the addition of two federally funded staff people at the Commission – a data analyst in fiscal 2006 and a secretary in fiscal 2007.
- We are pleased to invite you to attend the GEAR UP Kickoff Event, “GEARING UP for College, Career, and Life,” on December 8, 2005, at Trenton’s War Memorial. Sixth and seventh grade students and their parents, along with participating school district and college/university personnel, will be honored for their commitment to student preparation for higher education, and the Governor has been invited to deliver the keynote address.
- Before I close, I’d like to share a few words about my personal experience working on GEAR UP. Together with the staff of the Commission, the colleges and universities, HESAA and DOE, I’ve have the opportunity and the honor to guide the program’s growth and development since December 1999. I took pictures of those first 7th graders, as they studied, and performed experiments on water, and dissected sheep eyeballs in their science classes. You haven’t quite lived until you’ve watched a seventh-grade girl touch a sheep eyeball. I watched their names appear each year in the tracking databases we use. I approved their requests for scholarships. And I applauded many of them at their final graduation ceremony before they entered college. As you receive your handouts, you will note that they include a Success Story of one such student. You cannot imagine the satisfaction I experience from knowing that there are a lot of kids in college right now who would not have had the opportunity to do so without this program, without the dedication of the State to the College Bound Grant Program, which provides a lot of the matching funding, and without the ongoing devotion of the staff at the participating colleges, universities, and schools. I hope you will join me in taking pride in this achievement and in exploring ways to publish our successes and build upon them in the future.



Thank you for your time and attention, and I am happy to take any questions you may have.