USU announces $30M college prep project, impacting nearly 3,000 Utah students

By Wendy Leonard  @wendyleonards
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LOGAN — Times have changed at Mount Logan Middle School.

In the past 10 years, the number of students who get free or reduced-price lunch has more than doubled to nearly 60 percent, depicting a deepening socioeconomic status, according to Logan City School District Superintendent Marshal Garrett.

The incidence of students with English-language-proficiency challenges has also increased, to approximately 30 percent within that school.

And many of those students aren't making it to college.

Inner-city Logan isn't the only location in Utah where such numbers are impacting student career choices. The statistics are mimicked at various schools throughout the state, including in Tooele, Uintah, Davis, South Sanpete, North Sanpete and Nevada's Elko school districts, as well as three public charter schools in Salt Lake City.

A sizable federal grant, directed at 11 schools within those districts, aims to change the circumstances and encourage confidence in students, their teachers and the community, to foster a more educated workforce for the future.

"On average, only 16.1 percent of the students graduating from our target schools are enrolling in college after graduation, and in some cases that number is as low as 5 percent," said Yolanda Flores Niemann, professor of psychology at the Utah State University College of Education. "To combat this trend, we need to focus on more than just academics. We need to eliminate certain stigmas and stereotypes, and help students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members envision a college degree as a real possibility for students of all cultural and economic backgrounds."

Niemann is serving as project director for the USU-based Science, Technology, Arithmetic, Reading Students initiative, a partnership for the federally managed Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program.

On Tuesday, the program announced a $15.45 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Various state and national partners, including Texas Instruments, SureScore, Rocky Mountain NASA Space Consortium, the Space Dynamics Laboratory at USU, the Ute Indian Tribe, and several departments at the university, will together match dollar-for-dollar the federal funding for a project total of $30.9 million.

"If we can just assist the schools in preparing the students to go into post-secondary colleges, Utah will be better, the nation will be better, employment will be better," said Eric Packehnam, GEAR UP director at USU. "There are a lot of benefits that come behind those students being able to achieve the next step in their educational process. Everybody wins."

STARS will get students involved in hands-on learning, field trips to college campuses, summer camps and other activities that focus on science, technology, math and reading, which Niemann said are fundamental for most career paths.
"These students simply do not see themselves as future college students, but even worse, they believe that some of their teachers don't see them as college students," Niemann said. "We truly believe we can help change the culture of a school and of a community whereby every child is seen as a future college student and treated as such academically."

The various partners will be contributing the services they offer, including curricula improvements, technology, tutoring and counseling services, as well as support to give 2,793 fifth-, sixth- and seventh-grade students the confidence they need to succeed.

Teachers will also be given professional development training to help them teach the subjects better and in ways that are more receptive to children.

USU is one of just four recipients of the 2012 GEAR UP partnership grants, and received the largest allotment of the year. Last year, more than $177 million was doled out to 66 locations throughout the U.S.

The money will be paid out over seven years, allowing officials to track the project's progress and follow the students, providing resources all the way to some of the students' first days of college.

"It is a bridge for them to gain the confidence of knowing they can go on to have some post-secondary options," Garrett said. "In the past, Logan has had a strong presence of post-secondary options and this allows for all segments of our population to have those same doors open to them."

Packehnam said getting kids on a college campus "early and often" is one of the best predictors for them to get excited about going to college.

Participating schools are from more rural Intermountain West communities, and at least 50 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced lunch. The schools include students who need supplemental academic support in order to meet and exceed state academic standards in math and science, as well as students who need cultural and/or language support in order to transition into an English Academic program.

"The grant will allow us to redouble our efforts to get students to focus on post-secondary education opportunities and see that they are capable of being successful after high school," Garrett said.

E-mail: wleonard@desnews.com
Twitter: wendyleonards