

# GEAR UP CT: Year 5 Evaluation—Partnership Survey Results

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Report 10 of 14

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## Abstract

CNA serves as the external evaluator of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program Connecticut (GEAR UP CT), a seven-year, US Department of Education-funded initiative to improve college and career readiness and outcomes for low-income students. This report summarizes findings from a CNA survey of GEAR UP CT students, parents, and staff from participating schools in the 2023–2024 academic year. The goal of the survey was to understand perceptions of GEAR UP awareness, implementation, and effectiveness approximately halfway through the program. Survey results for students and parents indicate a noticeable increase in awareness of GEAR UP services available and expectations for participating students to attend postsecondary institutions since the 2021 survey; also, staff are participating in more GEAR UP activities and professional development opportunities since the original survey. As GEAR UP students enter their senior year of high school, GEAR UP CT should continue to focus on the diverse portfolio of activities because it is making an impact on student, parent, and staff perceptions of participating students' college and career readiness.

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**Cover image:** GEAR UP Connecticut.

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**Approved by:**

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# INTRODUCTION

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs Connecticut (GEAR UP CT) is a US Department of Education–funded program that aims to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. The seven-year GEAR UP CT grant, awarded in 2019, serves a student cohort in three school districts, and each district is paired with a community college partner. GEAR UP CT follows a cohort of students from middle school to their first year of postsecondary education over the life of the grant. Grant activities aim to increase students’ high school academic performance and graduation rates and prepare them for postsecondary education.

This report focuses on survey results from students, parents, and school staff including administrators, teachers, and counselors from participating schools during Year 5 of implementation (academic year 2023–2024), when the student cohort was in grade 11. The findings of this report are supplemented with information provided in regular meetings with the GEAR UP CT director, federal reporting documents on participation and outcomes, and quarterly reports and newsletters submitted by each GEAR UP CT partnership from June 2023 to January 2024.

We begin this report with an overview of the GEAR UP CT program. Then, we describe the approach that we used to analyze and summarize student, parent, and staff survey responses. We conclude with a summary of upcoming GEAR UP CT activities during the summer and fall of 2024 for students, parents, and staff in participating schools.

## GEAR UP CT overview

The US Department of Education awarded a seven-year \$25.8 million grant to the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) that runs from 2019 through 2026. CNA is partnering with GEAR UP CT through the life of the grant to conduct an external evaluation of grant implementation and effects.

The GEAR UP CT grant supports three local partnerships (see Table 1).

GEAR UP CT activities support three goals: (1) increase students’ academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education; (2) increase students’ educational expectations and student and family knowledge of postsecondary options, preparation, and financing; and (3) increase the rate of high school graduation and participation in postsecondary education.

Table 1. GEAR UP CT local partnerships

Community	Institution of Higher Education Partner	School District Partner
East Hartford	CT State Manchester	East Hartford Public Schools
Meriden	CT State Middlesex	Meriden Public Schools
Waterbury	CT State Naugatuck Valley	Waterbury Public Schools

Source: GEAR UP CT project narrative.



## Focus of report

This report, based on the 2023–2024 school year, shares the results of a second administration of surveys to students, parents, and staff. Specifically, the surveys are aimed at understanding how implementation activities contribute to the following outcomes:

- Increased student resilience skills
- Increased teacher and counselor knowledge and skills related to college and career readiness
- Increased student career awareness
- Increased family knowledge of college
- Increased family and student knowledge of college enrollment

## Survey approach

The CNA research team developed the surveys with assistance and feedback from the GEAR UP CT state project director. CNA administered an initial set of surveys to GEAR UP CT students, parents, and staff in fall 2021 to understand the perceptions of GEAR UP CT activities and college readiness at the beginning of the grant. CNA also administered a set of surveys in fall 2023 to understand how implementation of GEAR UP CT activities was going midway through the grant.

The GEAR UP CT state project director managed survey administration, working through local school site coordinators. Surveys were open from September 5, 2023, to December 1, 2023, for response from staff, parents, and students.

## Survey analysis

CNA analyzed the survey data using descriptive statistics (i.e., cross tabulations and averages). These techniques allow us to examine survey response by district and examine variation across districts.

More than 70 percent of all responding students found that GEAR UP CT programming increased their confidence in preparing for life after high school.



Source: GEAR UP CT

# FINDINGS

## Student survey results

Table 2 presents the student survey response rates by district.

Table 2. Student responses

District	Responses	Total Students	Response Rate
East Hartford	37	502	7%
Meriden	234	543	43%
Waterbury	327	1,295	25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>598</b>	<b>2,340</b>	<b>26%</b>

Source: CNA.

Note: Response rates can vary by question. The numbers listed are the highest possible response rate for that district.

Most respondents identified as female (53 percent of total respondents), with 42 percent identifying as male and the remaining percentage declining to respond or marking "Other." In addition, 40 percent of respondents identified as Hispanic, 31 percent as Black, 23 percent as White, 7 percent as Asian, and less than 5 percent as multiracial.<sup>1</sup> Given the distribution of responses from districts, higher than average student participation from Meriden and lower than average participation from East Hartford will affect these survey results, which should be considered when interpreting or generalizing survey findings.

### GEAR UP CT awareness

CNA designed part of the survey to ascertain student understanding of the core concepts of college and career readiness, awareness of school programming on that topic, and knowledge of students' participation in those programs. Results indicate that **most students surveyed understand college and career readiness and are generally aware of programming designed to support them.** However, variation between school districts in participation and understanding do exist. We summarize the results as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Individual percentages total more than 100 percent because some individuals identified themselves as belonging to multiple groups. In addition, CNA does not report percentages below 5 percent to preserve anonymity of the respondents.

- Most students surveyed across all three districts know what it means to be college read (87 percent) or career ready (83 percent).
- About half of responding students indicated that they have attended tutoring services offered through GEAR UP CT in the past two years, and roughly three-quarters of them have found those services to be valuable.
- **More than 70 percent of all responding students found that GEAR UP CT programming increased their confidence in preparing for life after high school.**



Source: GEAR UP CT

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the percent of students that GEAR UP CT helped with specific skills and knowledge that will prepare them for life after high school.

Table 3. Percent of students reporting that GEAR UP CT helped with skills and knowledge

Survey Item	East Hartford	Meriden	Waterbury	Overall
Academic awareness	89%	71%	91%	83%
Goal setting	84%	70%	91%	83%
College awareness	92%	67%	91%	82%
Career awareness	86%	65%	89%	79%
Test preparation	83%	63%	84%	76%
College tours	89%	57%	87%	76%
Organizational skills	81%	63%	85%	76%
Time management	84%	64%	83%	76%
Social and emotional learning	78%	59%	78%	71%

Source: CNA.

## Postsecondary plans

Across all postsecondary institutions and programs except for military service, **students' aspirations to attend postsecondary institutions increased by between 8 percent and 18 percent between 2021 and 2023 (Table 4)**. This result strongly indicates that GEAR UP CT is influencing students' expectations and their plans going into their senior year of high school.

## Impact

Survey results indicate student familiarity with GEAR UP CT services. In addition, students feel that GEAR UP CT support interventions are helping them in several academic and life skill areas to prepare them for life after high school. In addition, more students expect to attend postsecondary institutions than in the 2021 survey.

Table 4. Students expecting to attend different postsecondary institutions, 2021 vs. 2023

Postsecondary Institution	2021 Survey	2023 Survey	Difference
Connecticut state university	61%	79%	+18%
Out-of-state college or university	55%	72%	+17%
Connecticut community college	45%	62%	+17%
Connecticut private college or university	41%	56%	+15%
Technical, trade, or vocational school	30%	38%	+8%
Military service	20%	20%	0%

Source: CNA.



## Parent survey results

A total of 76 parents or guardians across all three school districts participated in the survey, which is approximately 3 percent of parents of participating GEAR UP CT students. Most respondents identified as female (66 percent of total respondents). In addition, 35 percent of respondents identified as Hispanic, 30 percent as White, 26 percent as Black, 5 percent as Asian, and less than 5 percent as multiracial.<sup>2</sup> Given the lower than expected participation rate from parents across the GEAR UP CT partnership, results from this survey may not fully represent views of all parents who have a student participating in GEAR UP CT.

The following sections examine the findings from the parent survey in two areas:

1. GEAR UP CT awareness
2. GEAR UP CT effectiveness

### GEAR UP CT awareness

CNA designed part of the survey to ascertain parent understanding of the core concepts of college and career readiness, awareness of school programming on that topic, and knowledge of their student’s participation in those programs. Results indicate that **parents surveyed understand college and career readiness and are generally aware of programming designed to support their student.**

We summarize the results as follows:

- Eighty-seven percent of parents surveyed are aware of GEAR UP CT within their student’s local high school.
- More than 80 percent of parents surveyed know what the terms college ready and career ready mean.

<sup>2</sup> Given the low number of responses, CNA is not providing a breakdown of the parent responses by school district in respondent characteristics. Select anonymized findings by district are provided in the following sections. Individual percentages total more than 100 percent because some individuals identified themselves as belonging to multiple groups. In addition, CNA does not report percentages below 5 percent to preserve anonymity of the respondents.

- Only about one-third of parents surveyed are familiar with the Portrait of a Graduate program or have received information on what the program entails.

For more information about the Portrait of a Graduate program in each of the GEAR UP CT participating school districts, see Table 5.

Table 5. GEAR UP CT Portrait of a Graduate websites

School District	Portrait of a Graduate Link
East Hartford	<a href="https://ehhs.easthartford.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=19402503&amp;pageId=27499067">https://ehhs.easthartford.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=19402503&amp;pageId=27499067</a> - page 35
Meriden	<a href="https://www.meridenk12.org/portrait-of-a-graduate/">https://www.meridenk12.org/portrait-of-a-graduate/</a>
Waterbury	<a href="https://www.waterbury.k12.ct.us/portrait-of-a-graduate">https://www.waterbury.k12.ct.us/portrait-of-a-graduate</a>

Source: CNA.

### GEAR UP CT effectiveness

Many of the survey questions explored parent and guardian views on GEAR UP CT’s influence on their student. Questions specifically explored academic outcomes such as grades and attendance, skills and knowledge related to preparedness for life after high school, and student understanding of the options available to them after graduation. Results suggest that **most parents and guardians surveyed feel that GEAR UP CT has helped their student learn about college and career options available to them while supporting them academically with relevant skills and knowledge.** We summarize the results as follows:

- **More confidence in academic classes:** Roughly 70 percent of parents surveyed said that tutoring or academic coaching through GEAR UP CT has provided their student with more confidence in their academic classes.
- **Improvement in grades:** About 65 percent of parents surveyed saw an improvement in their student's grades because of GEAR UP CT support.
- **Time management and organizational skills:** More than half of parents surveyed indicated that GEAR UP CT has helped their student with time management and organization.
- **Goal setting and academic awareness:** Most parents surveyed in East Hartford and Waterbury reported that GEAR UP CT has improved their student's skills in goal setting and academic awareness. A smaller percent of Meriden parents indicated improvement in these areas.
- **Career and college awareness:** Most parents and guardians surveyed (85 percent) across all districts reported that GEAR UP CT has helped their student with career and college awareness.
- **Social and emotional learning:** About 70 percent of parents surveyed felt that GEAR UP CT has helped their student with social and emotional skills or knowledge.
- **Test preparation:** Sixty-six percent or more of parents surveyed across all three districts felt that GEAR UP CT has helped their student with skills and knowledge around test preparation.

### *Impact*

Survey results are promising regarding parent and guardian perceptions of student preparedness for life after graduation and GEAR UP CT's role in readying students for college or the workforce. Parents and guardians' perceptions of the high school's role in their student's college and career readiness are positive. The results also suggest that GEAR UP CT has improved student academic success in high school, as evidenced by improvements in confidence, grades, and attendance. On average, 20 percent fewer parents and guardians feel that GEAR UP CT is preparing their student to enter the workforce compared to preparing their student for a two- or four-year college. As further opportunities arise for additional college and career exploration activities, we must continue to get a sense of how parents feel about these engagements and whether their students are taking advantage of them.

## Staff survey results

Table 6 presents the staff survey response rates by district.

Most respondents were teachers (77.6 percent of total respondents). Counselors were the second highest category (8.9 percent of total respondents). The remaining 13.5 percent of respondents included administrators, paraprofessionals, speech and behavioral specialists, social workers, and other school staff. Respondents worked with all four grades, with 56 percent of total respondents serving grade 9, 65 percent serving grade 10, 70 percent serving grade 11, and 63 percent serving grade 12.

Overall findings include the following:

- **More staff are participating in GEAR UP CT activities across the districts.** More than 60 percent of staff surveyed have participated in some kind of GEAR UP CT activity, including professional development, workshops, and events. This percentage is up more than 20 percent from the 2021 survey, when only 37 percent had participated in a GEAR UP CT activity.

- **Staff rate all GEAR UP CT supports as more effective than they did previously.** Most staff surveyed across all districts rated GEAR UP CT activities as extremely effective or effective, with some supports such as tutoring and college and career readiness rated as effective by more than 70 percent of staff. In the 2021 survey, only 30 percent of staff respondents rated the same GEAR UP CT activities as effective.

In addition to these overall findings, the results show that staff at participating GEAR UP CT schools see an improvement in student outcomes on all topics surveyed.

- Seventy-two percent of staff surveyed responded that GEAR UP CT participation improved student awareness of college options after high school.
- Seventy percent of staff surveyed noted that GEAR UP CT programming improved academic awareness, attendance, and grades for participating students.

Table 6. Staff responses

District	Responses	Total Staff	Response Rate
East Hartford	66	215	31%
Meriden	159	227	70%
Waterbury	181	397	46%
<b>Total</b>	<b>406</b>	<b>839</b>	<b>48%</b>

Source: CNA.

Note: Response rates can vary by question. The numbers listed are the highest possible response rate for that district.

- More than 50 percent of local education agency (LEA) staff reported improvement in student time management. Test preparation, organizational skills, and goal setting were the lowest overall areas of improvement as a result of the GEAR UP CT programming.
- Seventy-seven percent or more of total staff are aware of academic tutoring and coaching, PSAT and SAT workshops, and education on Connecticut State Community Colleges and options through GEAR UP CT services.
- Fewer than 53 percent of staff surveyed are aware of GEAR UP CT professional development, Pledge to Advance Connecticut (PACT)<sup>3</sup>, and social and emotional learning (SEL) workshops.

### *Impact*

Staff survey results are promising for the depth and breadth of successful GEAR UP CT programming and services. It is encouraging that more staff are aware of and taking advantage of GEAR UP CT training and supports. Staff report GEAR UP CT continues to receive support as a driver of change for student understanding of and preparation for life after high school. GEAR UP CT should continue to consider how to increase staff awareness of services beyond tutoring, such as professional development opportunities and SEL workshops.

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<sup>3</sup> PACT, or the Pledge to Advance Connecticut program, is an initiative by the State of Connecticut to make college affordable for first-time college students. Under PACT, eligible Connecticut residents can attend any of Connecticut's community colleges tuition and fee free.

# CONCLUSIONS AND GEAR UP CT ACTIVITIES

Students, parents, and staff report GEAR UP CT is making a difference in students' college and career readiness.

## GEAR UP CT activities

GEAR UP CT has made notable progress toward program goals and is having a demonstrable effect on student outcomes. As the program looks toward Year 6, the GEAR UP CT team will continue to build awareness and understanding of GEAR UP CT services offered. Goals for GEAR UP CT in Years 5–6 (grade 11 and 12) include increasing graduation rates, providing college tours, and focusing on student academics and student financial aid. In support of these goals, GEAR UP CT has recently created new programming activities:

- **Expansion of tutoring programs:** GEAR UP CT entered into a state contract with Kelly Education to provide a Tutoring Solutions Center of Excellence program in February 2023. This contract helped districts overcome setbacks from the COVID-19 pandemic through intensive onsite tutoring for students struggling to maintain passing grades to master grade-level content. Students are identified by teachers or counselors and receive tutoring to support skill acquisition for coursework success. GEAR UP CT provided 2,493 hours of tutoring to 590 students in grade 10.
- **College and career readiness:** Helping students understand and prepare for what will be expected of them upon entering a postsecondary program or the workforce

has been at the forefront of GEAR UP CT. Readiness consists of researching jobs and colleges, writing résumés, preparing cover letters, preparing for job and college interviews, developing workforce etiquette, and helping students secure summer employment. GEAR UP CT's partnership with Junior Achievement offered a career speaker series along with onsite job tours for students. This innovative series provided 1,010 students the opportunity to learn various career options across different industries and helped students to identify the steps needed to prepare for those careers. GEAR UP CT's current partnership with CSCU and CT State Community College informs students and families of various guided pathways, certificates, and programs associated with each career field along with financial aid workshops and FAFSA completion guidance.

- **Family engagement:** Over the past year, 278 parents and guardians attended various partner workshops and events in which GEAR UP CT shares information about its services and events. GEAR UP CT prioritizes communication with families and ensures that parents and guardians receive updated information. GEAR UP CT staff contact parents and guardians via phone and district technology such as Parent Square and Google Classroom. Weekly check-in calls to families and in-person and virtual events give all participants avenues to learn about GEAR UP CT services. In addition, GEAR UP CT signed a state contract to employ



a translation service for all in-person or virtual events to speak the native language of families attending to provide equity and inclusivity. GEAR UP CT staff record all events and email the recordings to families as follow-up communication. They also include links to recordings on each local website.

- **Family-student-LEA college knowledge activities:** To increase students' knowledge and awareness of career and college readiness, GEAR UP CT kicked off its first state marketing event in April 2023 by partnering with Scott Burrell, Southern CT State University basketball coach, and Morgan Tuck, WNBA champion. The event's theme was "What Is Your Post High School Game Plan?" During the event, various speakers presented to students from all three partnerships about the paths that they took after high school. GEAR UP CT has begun Year 5 with a marketing and awareness campaign that involves social media, newspaper ads in each local partnership, bus tail ads, and commercials aired on local TV. GEAR UP CT's marketing campaign will continue with a town hall event to promote strategies that help build awareness within the communities and to integrate the GEAR UP CT work and acknowledge partnerships.
- **College visits and college course participation and credits:** College visits for both families and students early on can help demystify the college experience, make college feel more accessible, and begin to supply the knowledge needed to prepare youth. GEAR UP CT has taken 792 students to various campuses to provide them with an understanding of campus life and an idea of finding the right fit. College partners offered a summer college experience program in which students attended a five-week college course and received three college credits that are eligible for a local district credit. During April 2023, GEAR UP CT offered a spring break tour of New England universities and colleges to 100 students, providing them with tangible post-high school benefits.  
  
By the end of the last school year, GEAR UP CT students have earned a total of 1,169 college credits through GEAR UP CT activities such as the summer college experience program and dual enrollment courses (high school courses that also secure college credit). In grade 9, 39 students had earned 357 college credits. By grade 10, 184 unduplicated students had taken a total of 270 classes and earned 812 college credits.

## Upcoming GEAR UP CT activities

GEAR UP CT has several activities planned for the summer and fall of 2024. GEAR UP CT services are provided at no cost. Those interested in participating in these activities or learning more about GEAR UP CT should visit <https://www.gearupct.com/>. GEAR UP CT has planned the following activities for students, parents, and staff.

### *Summer 2024 programming*

- CT State Manchester will offer one three-credit course over five weeks to allow students to earn college credits.
- CT State Middlesex will offer three courses over five weeks to allow students to earn college credits.
- CT State Naugatuck Valley will offer four classes over five weeks to allow students to earn college credits.

### *Fall 2024 programming*

GEAR UP CT will hold a marketing event on Tuesday, September 24, 2024, at Connecticut State Naugatuck Valley from 11:00 a.m. to noon. This event brings together the three partnerships at one central location to allow GEAR UP CT students to hear from various keynote speakers such as Coach Scott Burrell and Morgan Tuck on “What Is Your Post High School Game Plan?” as they enter their senior year of high school and consider postsecondary options. GEAR UP CT’s state project director, Christina Lapierre, will moderate the event.

GEAR UP CT students have earned a total of 1,169 college credits through GEAR UP CT activities such as the summer college experience program and dual enrollment courses.



Source: GEAR UP CT

## **This report was written by CNA's Safety and Security Division (SAS).**

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