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GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Bush Administration Evaluates GEAR UP and Seeks a Budget Cut

BY JENNIFER YACHNIN

GEAR UP is stuck in neutral. Supporters of the two-year-old program argue that it is the best of several government-led efforts to encourage young students from low-income families to prepare for college. But whether the Bush administration will warm to GEAR UP—which was started and championed by President Bill Clinton—is unclear. President Bush has requested just \$227-million for the program in the 2002 fiscal year, a 23-percent decrease,

er how the proposed budget cut would affect students. The Bush budget plan would provide enough money to allow current programs to continue, but it would eliminate new grants.

"If there were to be this type of cut, even for a year, it would weaken existing programs and mean tens of thousands of young people who think they're going to be part of a college mentoring program would be essentially dropped," says Gene B. Sperling, a visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution, who was an economic adviser to President Clinton.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

GEAR UP, which stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, pairs schools in low-income areas with colleges and local businesses so that entire grades of students—typically from the seventh grade through graduation—can benefit from mentoring and academic programs.

The program has awarded 237 grants to local partnerships in 42 states, and in Guam, Micronesia, and Puerto Rico. Twenty-eight states have received additional money through GEAR UP, for programs that award college scholarships and work to align elementary and secondary curriculums with the entrance requirements of state colleges and universities.

In 2000, the average local grant was roughly \$460,000 and the average state grant was \$1.7-million. Both the states and the local part-



Gene B. Sperling, a scholar at the Brookings Institution: A 23-percent cut would weaken existing GEAR UP programs

nerships are required to match the federal contribution dollar for dollar.

Program participants say GEAR UP is unique among federal outreach programs because it seeks to influence students in middle school, well before they have settled on a college or vocational career track. The Clinton administration intended for a new crop of middle-school students to be added each year, but those plans will be shelved if the program's budget is cut.

FLEXIBLE RULES

The local partnerships have tremendous latitude to develop their own programming. The partnership involving public schools in Philadelphia, for example, coordinates field trips to local colleges, so that middle-school students can meet with undergraduates, professors, and admissions and financial-aid administrators.

"Students can see that college is not something that's far out of their reach," says Thomas Butler, who oversees the Philadelphia program.

The partnerships are strongly encouraged to arrange sessions with parents, which can be classes that last just an hour or courses that run for several weeks. A public-school partnership in Arlington, Va., sponsors workshops for parents on academic planning, and on less-obvious aspects of student life that could affect preparation for college, such as teen depression or familiarity with the Internet.

The Education Department's review of GEAR UP will focus on 20 partnerships and seven state programs. Department officials decline to identify which grant recipients will be evaluated, but they say they plan to release four reports on the program over the next six years. The first, which will examine how well the programs are being carried out in schools, is slated for release this summer.

Some of GEAR UP's strongest supporters, including the California State University System and the United States Student Association,

are still pushing Congress to increase the program's budget by 44 percent, to \$425-million.

"This program meets so many of the demands that members of Congress are making—it is a public-private partnership, it is targeting the most at-risk group of students, it's flexible spending," says Corye Barbour, the legislative director of the United States Student Association. "It really fills a gap that none of our other programs meet."

Others merely hope that the program's budget will be sustained. GEAR UP does have some bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. Republican backers include Rep. Mark Souder of Indiana, who serves on the House subcommittee that oversees the student-aid programs, and Sen. James M. Jeffords of Vermont, the chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee.

"The fact that there are now more than one million kids in GEAR UP in places like Oklahoma, Colorado, Alaska, and the like, means [the program] now reaches members of both parties, because they have constituents who are benefit-

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ing from the program," says Rep. Chaka Fattah, a Pennsylvania Democrat who helped conceive GEAR UP.

The outlook for GEAR UP would be brighter if it had widespread support among colleges. But many college officials object to program rules that require them to use GEAR UP scholarships only as a last resort when assembling aid packages. Congress and Education Department officials put those rules in place to ensure that scholarship re-

cipients would not see their campus aid reduced as a result. (The scholarships will be only a modest portion of most GEAR UP budget until 2005, when students in the program begin to graduate from high school in large numbers, but some states already offer the awards.)

The Student Aid Alliance, a coalition of college groups that lobbies for federal financial aid, is seeking no new money for GEAR UP. One member, the National Association of Independent College and Universities, is especially ambivalent about the program.

"It's a real tragedy that rule is in there, because absent that, this program could really help some needy kids," says Sarah A. Flanagan, vice president for government relations at the independent-colleges association. Instead, the association has lobbied for more money for TRIO, a program that also helps low-income students prepare for and pay for college.

THE 'LAST-DOLLAR RULE'

That stance has angered some advocates for GEAR UP, including Hector Garza, president of the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, a nonprofit organization in Washington.

Mr. Garza points to Oklahoma's GEAR UP program as an example of how the "last-dollar rule" quandary can be easily fixed. The state revised the rules on its state grants, so that they are awarded near the end of the process, just before the GEAR UP funds are tapped.

"Higher-education associations were involved with the negotiated rule-making when these regulations were put into place," Mr. Garza says. "They had ample opportunities to express their concerns. They didn't do that at that time. The program is under way, the program is working. It's time for them to get on board."

The broad support for TRIO also hurts GEAR UP. Mr. Bush is seeking \$780-million dollars for TRIO, a 6.8-percent increase. That program's supporters say GEAR UP duplicates services that TRIO already provides, and they fear that the younger program's troubles could sink TRIO, too. "How do you solve the GEAR UP problem?" asks Maureen Hoyler, executive vice president of the Council on Opportunity, which lobbies on behalf of TRIO. "Do you take money from the proposed TRIO increase?" She says that's a worst-case scenario, and that she is optimistic that Congress won't cut TRIO's budget.

Meanwhile, supporters of GEAR UP must try to convince legislators that a cut would thwart the program's goal: reaching students before they enter high school.

"If we're going to make a difference in the lives of low-income and first-generation students, we have to start before high school," says Susan Bonoff, a GEAR UP program director at Walter Reed Middle School, in North Hollywood, Calif. "By the time a lot of them get there the die has already been cast."

PENDING

A snapshot of a new bill facing higher education

At issue:

Granting permanent-resident status to undocumented immigrants who have applied to or are enrolled in a college in the United States

Gist:

The Immigrant Children's Educational Advancement and Dropout Prevention Act of 2001, introduced in April by Rep. Luis Guterrez, an Illinois Democrat, would grant amnesty to illegal immigrants who are enrolled in high school or college, or who are applying to college. Only immigrants who entered the United States before turning 16 years old and have lived in the country for at least five consecutive years would be eligible. The students also would become eligible for state and federal financial aid. The legislation would amend the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, to remove a clause that some state officials, including those in California, have said restricts them from offering in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants. If approved, the bill could benefit as many as 50,000 to 75,000 illegal immigrants who graduate from public secondary schools each year.

Outlook:

Critics of amnesty programs say it's unlikely the bill will pass Congress without support from the White House, and it is unclear whether President Bush will back the legislation. Even with Mr. Bush's support, the bill could face a tough road, as it will no doubt be opposed by Republicans, such as Rep. Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican, who favors tougher immigration laws. The bill is currently before the House Education Committee, which may not take it up before completing reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The bill also is pending in the House Judiciary Committee, which has not scheduled any action on it. There is currently no companion bill in the Senate.