

# GEAR UP TN

**Guide for School Administrators  
2025 - 2026**

# GEAR UP TN

In August 2024, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) was awarded a Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant by the United States Department of Education (USDOE). GEAR UP, a seven-year discretionary grant program, aims to increase the number of students who graduate from high school and enroll in college. Tennessee's GEAR UP project, GEAR UP TN, will provide services to two cohorts of 1,600 students beginning in the 7th grade. The first cohort, the Class of 2030, will receive services through their first year of college. The second cohort, the Class of 2031, will be in their senior year of high school in the final year of the grant. GEAR UP TN will also serve 1,450 priority seniors in years 2-7 and continue to serve them during their first year of college. Services will begin for seniors in year 2 as all key college-going milestones will have passed by the time services could begin in Year 1. In total, the project will directly serve 9,000 students.

Driven by the belief that every student has the potential to attend and thrive in postsecondary education, GEAR UP TN aims to dramatically increase the number of Tennesseans accessing and succeeding in higher education.

## GEAR UP Goals

- Increasing the academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education for GEAR UP students
- Increasing the rates of high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education for GEAR UP students
- Increasing GEAR UP students' and their families' knowledge of postsecondary education options, preparation, and financing

## GEAR UP TN's Programmatic Objectives

- Increase student academic achievement and course completion.
- Increase student performance on college entrance exams.
- Increase student high school graduation.
- Increase student postsecondary participation and success.
- Increase student and family educational expectations.
- Increase student and family knowledge of and access to financial assistance for postsecondary education.
- Increase parent and community engagement in activities associated with student preparation for college.
- Increase educator content-area knowledge and understanding.

GEAR UP TN works with community-based sites in six counties across the state in order to accomplish these goals. Through the schools, GEAR UP TN provides students with direct services, including mentoring, tutoring, college visits, and financial aid counseling.

This is the fourth GEAR UP grant awarded to THEC from the USDOE, and the average growth in the college-going rate for the schools that participated in those grants are listed below. Some schools have experienced growth in their college-going rate greater than 20 percentage points during the seven-year period, and the average FAFSA submission rate has increased over 20 percent across GEAR UP schools over the past 5 years.

## **GEAR UP Grant History in Tennessee**

### **2005 – 2011 GEAR UP TN Grant**

- 10.7 percentage point increase in college-going rate across all GU schools

### **2012 – 2019 GEAR UP TN Grant**

- 9 percentage point increase (2015 data) in college-going rate across all GU schools

### **2017 Grant**

- Survey data indicates that 74% of cohort students are expected to enroll in higher education after high school. 89% of seniors completed the TN Promise application.

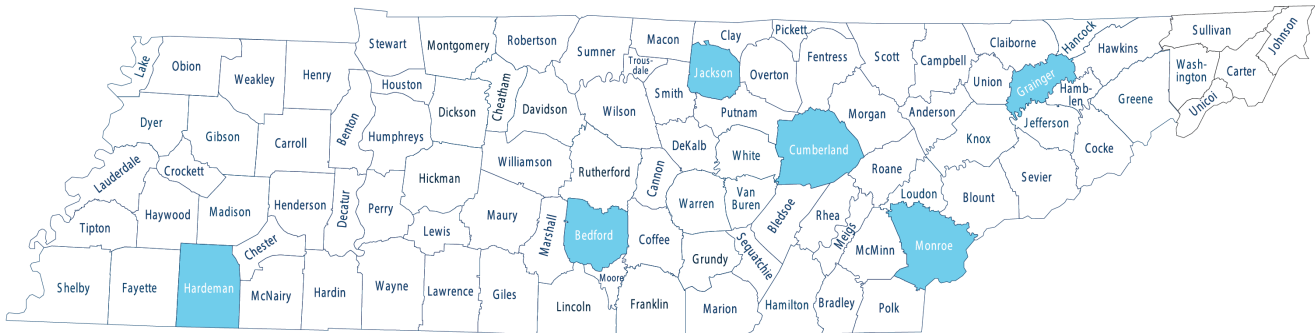
In the Spring of 2024, THEC identified 10 target high schools and their 18 feeder middle schools to participate in the project. To be eligible for a GEAR UP TN grant, high schools had to meet two requirements:

- 1) have the lowest college-going rate among Tennessee high schools, based on the most recent three years of data; and
- 2) have at least 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The identified schools were asked to submit a notice of interest and THEC staff conducted site visits and met in-person with district and school leadership to provide information about the opportunity, answer questions, and gauge commitment at the local level. THEC staff used a scoring rubric to make final determinations. The amount of funding that each school system will receive was determined by the number of students served, the size of the participating schools, and the resources needed to fully and successfully implement a college access, readiness, and success program. Over 15 million dollars will be awarded to these selected high schools throughout the life of the grant.

# GEAR UP TN 4.0 School Systems

## Schools and Counties Served by GEAR UP



### High Schools

- Bolivar Central High School • Cascade High School • Community High School • Cumberland County High School
- Grainger County High School • Jackson County High School • Middleton High School
- Shelbyville High School • Tellico Plains High School • Washburn School

### Middle Schools

- Bolivar Middle School • Brown Elementary School • Cascade Middle School • Coker Creek Elementary School
- Community Middle School • Dodson Branch School • Harris Middle School • Hornsby Elementary School
- Jackson County Middle School • Liberty School • Martin Elementary School • Pleasant Hill Elementary School • Rural Vale School
- Rutledge Middle School • South Cumberland Elementary School
- Tellico Plains Junior High School • Toone Elementary School • Whiteville Elementary School

### GEAR UP TN Framework

GEAR UP TN implementation is driven by a logic model that is founded on current college access and success research, experience in implementing successful college access programs, and replication of effective practice gleaned from the state and nation. The GEAR UP TN framework is organized around four focus areas: Think, Know, Act, and Go.

**Think, Know, Act, Go:** GEAR UP TN's theoretical framework is derived from Kurleander, Reed, and Hunt's review of the existing body of research on college readiness (2019). Each area includes services that have been studied and shown to produce evidence through the What Works Clearing house standards.

**Think:** Aspirations and beliefs: Students will believe that college is possible and that it is important for future success. Schools will embrace a college-going culture and set high expectations for all students.

**Know:** Academic preparation: Students will be academically prepared for education after high school.

**Act:** Knowledge and information: Students and families will understand the steps needed to prepare, apply to, and pay for college. Schools will support students in completing critical steps in the college-going process.

**Go:** Fortitude and resilience: Students will develop the social-emotional competencies and self-regulation skills to persist through challenges at school and on the path to college.

# GEAR UP TN Services

THEC will work with GEAR UP TN Schools to foster a college-going culture, devise creative approaches to reach and connect with students, and, most importantly, assist students and their families as they learn about, prepare for, and navigate the college-going process. GEAR UP TN programming will supplement, not replace, existing efforts to improve students' academic and social preparedness for postsecondary education. **At its core, GEAR UP TN is a partnership between THEC and the GEAR UP TN School Systems.**

## GEAR UP TN School Systems have made the following commitments:

1. Hire a qualified program coordinator (s), hereafter referred to as "site coordinator," to implement and coordinate the GEAR UP TN project within direct-service schools. The site coordinator must be approved by THEC and must be no less than an 11-month employee.
2. Participate in required program evaluation activities and programmatic agreements such as a Data Sharing Agreement between the LEA, high school, Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), and THEC.
3. Collect and report student- and school-level demographic and academic data in a timely and accurate manner.
4. Foster the development of a GEAR UP TN Steering Committee made up of, at minimum, representatives from each GEAR UP TN School member organization, one student, and one parent. The GEAR UP TN Steering Committee will meet two times a year, provide assistance in developing the annual GEAR UP TN work plan, provide community support to grant initiatives, and assist in project sustainability planning.
5. Implement all required service activities each year of the grant as directed by THEC in accordance with GEAR UP TN implementation guidance.

GEAR UP TN services will include an array of interventions addressing the four GEAR UP TN focus areas. GEAR UP TN services will include academic interventions, career exploration, college awareness and readiness work, and postsecondary transition services. Each cohort student will participate in annual one-on-one advising sessions to map out their academic, career, and postsecondary plans. GEAR UP TN schools will create an annual work plan that outlines GEAR UP TN services and how services are aligned with GEAR UP TN goals, objectives, and metrics. Schools will be provided the opportunity to design interventions that address GEAR UP TN goals and objectives and that meet their specific needs. **GEAR UP TN services must supplement and not supplant existing services currently offered at selected direct-service schools.**

# Developing a Sustainable College-Going Culture

For the seniors, GEAR UP TN services will primarily focus on helping them meet college-going milestones such as the completion of TN Promise applications, college applications, and the FAFSA. However, the GEAR UP model focuses on the work with the cohort students because this is the group of students that the program follows for the entire grant. The cohort group is also used to develop the college-going culture at each GEAR UP school and to develop partnerships and strategies that will lead to sustaining the outcomes and services of GEAR UP once the grant ends. For these reasons, a majority of each school's time, funds, and resources should be focused on the cohort group each year. As a guide, about 60 percent of a site's time, effort, and resources should be spent on the cohort and about 40 percent on the seniors.

## Evaluation and Data Sharing

GEAR UP TN School Systems will commit to participating in the evaluation of the GEAR UP TN project by sharing student-level academic and demographic data and collecting student service participation data. School Systems also commit to administer student surveys, participate in evaluator-led focus groups.

Schools Systems are required to sign a data sharing agreement between the School Systems, THEC, and the TDOE to share student-level data of participating students. Data will be used to evaluate the GEAR UP TN program and to allow the program to better target interventions and support to meet students' individual needs. Furthermore, THEC will provide outcomes data such as FAFSA completion and college enrollment with participating schools to assist school systems in meeting their goals. Schools must commit to providing the program with student-level data from the local student information system as needed. The GEAR UP TN site coordinator will track all students' progress towards meeting established benchmarks.

## Duration of the Partnership

GEAR UP TN School Systems will be awarded annual grants starting January, 2025 through June 30, 2031.

## Award Conditions

The amount of funding awarded to each school system may vary based upon the number of students served, size and number of the participating schools, and resources needed to fully and successfully implement the program requirements. GEAR UP TN is funded through a discretionary grant program administered by the USDOE. Awards are contingent upon THEC receiving funding from the USDOE, availability of funds within the grant budget, and upon THEC's evaluation of funded programs for compliance with program requirements and effectiveness of project activities.

## Grant Match

Commit to contributing at least 25 percent of one site coordinators' annual salary and benefits starting in year 4 – and increasing by 25 percent in each of the following 3 years.

# GEAR UP TN

We are fortunate to be partnering with you! If you have any questions or need further information, please reach out.



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Establish program goals and priorities

Program oversight

Manage program Implementation



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Expenditure allowability

Match guidelines, documentation

Annual work plan and budget

Monthly Activity Plans (MAPs) and Completed Activity Reports (CARs)



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