

GEAR UP school aid program to serve 1,700

Students encouraged by Napolitano during ceremony at the capitol

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Published: 01.31.2007, *Tucson Citizen*

Gov. Janet Napolitano turned cheerleader Tuesday, firing up children who will take part in a program aimed at getting students from poorer areas through high school and into college.

"You are at a point to decide what future you want to have," Napolitano said during a ceremony on the State Capitol lawn. "You can make those decisions based on education that gears you up for education at the university level."

About 1,700 students from around the state are set to participate in the second phase of a Northern Arizona University College of Education program called GEAR UP, or Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. The students attend 18 schools in Flagstaff, Yuma, Coolidge, Globe, Miami and Phoenix.

An entire class of students enrolls in GEAR UP during seventh grade and continues as a group through high school, receiving mentoring, advising and scholarships.

Arizona received \$17 million from the federal government to provide the second phase of GEAR UP.

"We have enormous confidence in the program because students make a commitment early on and work closely with dedicated staff," said John Haeger, NAU's president.

The first phase of the program ended last year. Of the students who took part, 5 percent dropped out of school, lower than the statewide rate of 21 percent, according to a GEAR UP news release.

"College is the key to the future," said GEAR UP alumnus Hector Araujo, who graduated from Westwood High School in Mesa and now attends NAU. "The program will take you anywhere you want to go in life if you are dedicated."

Nearly 200 students attended Tuesday's kickoff ceremony. Javier Delgadillo, a 13-year-old attending Sullivan School in Phoenix, said he was eager to get started.

"(GEAR UP) will help me by paying for college and not letting me drop out," Delgadillo said. Several organizations have agreed to provide resources for GEAR UP students.

When students graduate, they can apply for scholarships out of federal money granted to the program, said Teena Olszewski, director of Arizona GEAR UP.