Preparing New GEAR UP Leaders for Success, Part II: Foundational Issues in GEAR UP Implementation

Lessons Learned

1.) Establishing a Strong Foundation for 1st Year Success and Beyond

Known Challenges

- Receiving your grant award just before or after the school year begins
- Hiring and onboarding staff and partners in a timely fashion
- Reaffirming buy-in and support from your own organization, your school leaders, and your partners
- Ensuring your key stakeholders understand the framework for implementation: the statute, regulations, administrative requirements, and your approved proposal
- Developing a strong administrative and compliance infrastructure that meets expectations without overtaxing your team
- Delays in your launch have downstream effects—missed opportunities for programming, carry-over, ability to meet performance objectives

Lessons Learned

- Getting the right people on board is critical for your success, but being right is better than being fast
  - Qualifications and the terms of your application matter a lot, but ensuring your potential staff have a unique passion for the work is critical (i.e. this isn’t a status quo job)
  - You need change agents who can help drive the shared GEAR UP vision—especially when things stall
  - Whether you are centralized or decentralized in your hiring process, define the non-negotiable traits that you cannot live without given your program design
- Your staff and stakeholders will begin the GEAR UP experience craving information. Host kick-off meetings that:
  - Explain what GEAR UP is and isn’t
  - Articulate your goals, objectives, and theory of action
  - Persuade them on the benefits of your program
  - Clearly define roles and responsibilities among your stakeholders
  - Introduce administrative rules, requirements, and processes
  - Learn their hopes and align to them
- Build awareness and excitement in the community—get the word out early and often about the GEAR UP opportunity
  - Have a communications/media strategy for announcing your initiative
  - Have local agency, institution, and school leaders speak to the opportunity
  - Begin building your GEAR UP brand with students, families, and the community—in person, web, social media
- Establish your administrative infrastructure
  - To the extent possible, streamline processes as much as possible to allow your implementation team to focus on services, rather than paperwork
  - Create a policy and procedures manual to ensure alignment between compliance requirements, implementation guidelines, and the processes expected of your team
  - Establish risk management policies, particularly when it comes to student participation in programs
  - Create an ongoing training and technical assistance plan for staff and stakeholders
- Maintaining an effective working relationship with participating schools is a year-round effort, so use professional development to nurture the leadership skills of your GEAR UP site coordinators and teams
2.) Creating a Culture of Continual Improvement

Known Challenges

- You will be constantly reinventing your program year after year, from middle school to college
- Your scope of your program will be a test of your focus, time, and budget so ensuring you get the most from your finite resources is essential
- Your proposal was in essence, a hypothesis, and you will have to make tough decisions about what works, what doesn’t, and what needs to change
- Your GEAR UP student population will change for reasons well outside of your control
- It is your responsibility to anticipate and navigate change

Lessons Learned

- Establish an advisory group/steering committee of key leaders to help inform high-level strategic decisions pertaining to your program design and implementation
- Regularly convene and empower your staff to be change agents—you can’t do it all, so equip them to make good decisions
- Formalize an annual work plan process that asks your stakeholders to reflect on critical questions that can inform adaptation, help inform future initiatives as your cohort/students advance, and define clear expectations for implementation
- Ensure that formative evaluation is a central tenet of your operations—your evaluator should have a seat at the leadership table
- Be proactive in addressing changes to your student population
  - Plan for filling seats in the program when students leave
  - Plan for the transition to high school, especially if there will be 9th graders who weren’t previously at a GEAR UP MS
  - Plan for serving students at the postsecondary level if you have a 7th year
  - Anticipate the impact on your budget
- Be aware of and mitigate against potential funding risks with the U.S. Department of Education
  - Being unprepared for your annual audit or a surprise federal audit
  - Too much budget carry-over from year to year
  - Making insufficient progress towards meeting the GEAR UP match
  - Student service numbers dip too far below the expected numbers in your proposal
  - Making insufficient progress towards your project objectives
3.) Nurturing Your Partnership

Known Challenges

- Regardless if you’re centralized or decentralized, ensuring that your schools and other partners are successful requires a great deal of effort
- Like any partnership, each party comes to the relationship with specific wants, requirements, and traits that you need to navigate
- The partnership distributes authority and responsibilities, so a lack of clarity or satisfaction among the partnership members is a barrier
- Keeping motivation high: the length and complexity of the grant can lead to fatigue
- Turnover is inevitable—the people and leaders you count on will change

Lessons Learned

- Establishing a shared vision among your principal stakeholders is critical for earning buy-in; evolving that vision is critical for keeping it
- Put your goals, timelines, responsibilities, and budget in writing--have a MOA/contract so everyone is on the same page
- Create school-based teams to ensure that the work of GEAR UP is aligned to and advancing the broader goals of the school, minimizes duplicative efforts, and creates value for your school leaders
- Facilitate an annual work plan process that conveys core requirements (where needed), but empower your school partners to contribute and take ownership
4.) Creating A Culture of Evidence

Known Challenges

- Applicants frequently underestimate the effort and investment needed to create the right data infrastructure
- Given how important it is to prove your impact, you’ll spend a lot more time on this work than you think
- The data collection requires quality relationships, technical expertise, and legal/data sharing agreements
- You’ll need to navigate to a labyrinth of data sources
- You will create new processes for documenting your direct services
- Using evidence to guide program improvement

Lessons Learned

- Be smart, realistic, and persistent
- Ensure you’re making a sufficient investment in your evaluation infrastructure
- Recruit technical experts for help and empower your evaluator
- Define and share a clear data map that details the data collection requirements, sources, and methods for each variable required by the GEAR UP APR/FPR, your performance objectives, and your broader evaluation plan
  - Pro Tip: Download the resources from CBW sessions P1 and S12
- Build a trusting relationship with the “owners” of the data, especially if you’re collecting personally-identifiable information
- Establish a coherent data management system—there are specific traits to target:
  - Complies with FERPA and local policies
  - Create a relational database that is linked by a unique participant identifier
  - Ensure that variables are defined consistently for comparison
  - Focus on usability—people will need to enter, analyze, and report data
  - Verify data regularly to uncover potential problems
  - Create policies that support formative/summative evaluation and longitudinal data tracking
- Even if it goes beyond what was described in your application, creating comparison groups and performance benchmarks can guide your internal thinking
- While building your data infrastructure will be your early focus, don’t lose sight of applying your evidence to guide decision-making
- Be intentional about how you incorporate your data into your leadership meetings, annual planning, and change management
- Make your findings approachable and known—get the word out on the difference that you’re making