

# GEAR UP: GUIDING STUDENTS ALONG THE PATH TO SUCCESS

## How an Iowa High School Helped Students Achieve **College and Career Readiness** with ACT.

**GEAR UP** is a federal program that follows students from seventh grade through their first year of college, preparing students for postsecondary education—especially those from low-income or underserved backgrounds. The program provides comprehensive college and career readiness support, from instruction on higher education options and career paths, to resources for families, to scholarships when students graduate.

When Kennedy High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, received a GEAR UP grant, program coordinator Laurie Mead knew it was an opportunity to help the 475 students in the program prepare for college and career success. She used a suite of ACT products and services to assist her in achieving this goal.

“There are so many skills you’re learning in the background when you’re studying with ACT.”

**Laurie Mead**  
GEAR UP coordinator  
Kennedy High School

Mead explained that GEAR UP offers three main support systems: academic assistance, social and emotional learning, and college and career exploration. Because the suite of ACT products is so diverse, GEAR UP was able to use ACT resources to boost students' learning, measure their progress, and provide support for noncognitive skills and career readiness, too. “ACT was a great partner in that process,” Mead said, noting that ACT helped her provide “every piece of the puzzle” when it came to the different kinds of support her students needed.

Additionally, the GEAR UP grant meant Mead could offer all this at no cost to her students—providing equal access to these resources and helping everyone succeed.

One of the crucial aspects of the GEAR UP program, Mead explained, is that with each passing year, the program's goals change to fit the needs of the students. “You’re teaching them, in their environment, what’s important to them during that particular year,” she said. The combination of measurement and learning tools from ACT made this smart, focused instruction possible. “We didn’t just put them on the path,” Mead said. “We gave them the skills they need to be successful on that path.”

As part of GEAR UP programming, Mead implemented PreACT® tests to measure tenth graders' readiness levels and identify which skills they should focus on while studying. For some students who had never considered college an option, a solid score on the PreACT meant they discovered abilities—and possibilities—they never thought they had.

PreACT also helped set students up for success when they took the ACT® test their junior year. “The PreACT report that comes to our students is a great tool for studying,” Mead said, explaining how the category breakdowns showed her students exactly where they needed to focus. Mead used ACT® Academy™ to help her students practice in those areas using tailored quizzes and videos.



# Cedar Rapids Kennedy High School

## Gearing Up for Success with ACT

**Pre-<sup>ACT</sup>**  
Testing college  
readiness during  
tenth grade

**ACT<sup>®</sup> Academy™**  
Targeted  
learning

**ACT<sup>®</sup> Tessera**  
(previously  
**ACT<sup>®</sup> Engage**)  
social and  
emotional  
learning

**ACT<sup>®</sup> WorkKeys**  
Trade skills  
development

**ACT<sup>®</sup> WorkKeys  
NCRC**  
Measuring  
career readiness

**The ACT<sup>®</sup>**  
Testing college  
readiness during  
eleventh grade

Mead said that ensuring students were ready to take the ACT their junior year helped them prepare for all potential postsecondary options as seniors. She explained that this timing was key: “It really gives our students an advantage,” she said

This advantage has had significant impact in the lives of GEAR UP students. The program led to a participation rate of 69% in ACT testing statewide, versus roughly 49% when the ACT is offered through district testing without GEAR UP support. It also led to a major increase in the number of families filling out FAFSAs—a great indicator that they’re planning for college, according to Mead.

“**It has opened up the doors for so many of our students to experience a life that they may not have been otherwise able to experience.”**

**Laurie Mead**  
*GEAR UP coordinator  
Kennedy High School*

For GEAR UP students who don’t currently have plans for college, Mead used ACT<sup>®</sup> WorkKeys<sup>®</sup> to develop career skills, leading to some students receiving the ACT<sup>®</sup> NCRC<sup>®</sup>, demonstrating their career readiness. This is an extra initiative at Kennedy outside the scope of the GEAR UP funding, but in Mead’s mind, it’s very much in line with the goal of preparing all students for their futures.

Mead liked that ACT shared her vision of helping students along diverse paths to success, including those not headed to two- or four-year institutions. ACT WorkKeys and ACT NCRC helped her serve career-bound students, too. “Walking out of high school with a platinum NCRC certificate, a resumé, and some job experience...it really gives our students a hand up,” Mead said.

Finally, ACT Engage (now ACT<sup>®</sup> Tessera<sup>®</sup>) also allowed Mead to help students develop the social and emotional skills they would need in both higher education and the workplace. One of the unique aspects of GEAR UP is the way the program focuses not just on academic and career skills, but also on the “soft skills” students need. ACT Engage helped students measure and build social and emotional skills like grit, Mead said—another reason ACT was such a good fit for GEAR UP’s comprehensive focus.

Mead said it has been rewarding to see the results of her students’ hard work: “The hugs, the smiles... and those acceptance letters.” She was thrilled to watch students—including many who had never previously considered college—putting on their caps and gowns and discussing how they would decorate their dorm rooms.

“It has opened up the doors for so many of our students to experience a life that they may not have been otherwise able to experience,” Mead said.

She explained that ACT played a critical role in helping these students prepare for success. “It’s not just the exams,” she said. “There are so many skills you’re learning in the background when you’re studying with ACT. You’re learning the rigor, you’re learning how to push through when you don’t understand something.

“And the joy and the pride that brings to a student,” Mead added, “...you just can’t explain it in words.”

Learn more at  
[act.org/k12](https://act.org/k12) and [act.org/gearup](https://act.org/gearup).

