Education program gets big financial boost to help Utah's disadvantaged students

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By Geoffrey Fattah, Deseret News

PROVO — When Bruno Lima came to the United States 12 years ago with his parents from Brazil, the only words of English he knew were "yes" and "no."

Now a sophomore at Brigham Young University, studying to be an orthodontist, Lima has not only mastered English, but Spanish and Cambodian, having served an LDS mission to Cambodia. But while Lima has worked very hard to get to this point, he had the help of an innovative program called GEAR UP.

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for GEAR UP," Lima said. Based at Utah Valley University, GEAR UP is a federally-funded program that helps disadvantaged students achieve the dream of a college education through mentoring and tutoring.
"In many cases, they will not only be the first generation to graduate from college, but they will be the first generation to graduate from high school," said GEAR UP director Laurie Miller.

The program has helped 4,000 disadvantaged Utah students over the past six years. The program provides tutors and counselors in school districts across the state. Miller said GEAR UP students face some steep life challenges.

"They are dealing with living in poverty, many are dealing with the influences of gangs, so we try to make it a different choice in their lives; some of them are homeless, some of them are in foster care," Millers aid. She recalls an East High School student who was shot in an act of gang violence. "Sitting in the hospital recovering from that, he had an epiphany that this was not the way he wanted his life to go."

After joining GEAR UP, Miller said that same student is now preparing to go to college.

The program reports having a 91 percent high school graduation rate, a significant increase from the national average of 50 percent for low-income students. The program has also seen a 58 percent college graduation rate.

This month the Utah GEAR UP program received a significant boost to its efforts, with a $26 million federal grant. Miller said the funds will be able to expand the program to help more than 12,000 disadvantaged students in 13 school districts across the state, helping inner city minorities to students on rural reservations.

"This is a coup for secondary and higher education throughout the state of Utah," said UVU vice president for student affairs, Cory Duckworth. "Through this program, greater numbers of junior high and high school students will have greater opportunities to prepare for their college education."

Due to federal budget cuts, funding for GEAR UP programs has been cut across the United States. Utah managed to beat out other states for the funding.

Lima said the program helped him apply for a much-needed scholarship, which supplements a side job to pay his tuition. He now sees a brighter future when he graduates. "It's hard to imagine now, but I am going to be there, and I know my parents are going to be proud of me."

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