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LA GEAR UP Schools Recognized by ACT for Test Score Improvements

Eight Louisiana high schools were recently recognized by ACT, providers of America's most widely-accepted college entrance examination, for accomplishing the difficult feat of simultaneously improving their students' ACT average scores by at least one point and increasing the number of test takers. Such a feat is of course noteworthy for any school, but in Louisiana's case, two of the eight schools singled out, Pine High School, in Washington Parish, and Avoyelles High School, in Avoyelles Parish, are participants in Louisiana's LA GEAR UP program. LA GEAR UP is a federally-funded initiative now in its fifth year, aimed at increasing college awareness, readiness and enrollment among students at targeted schools across the state whose graduates have historically not enrolled in college for a range of reasons.

"When we see a school that has increased scores while also increasing the number of test takers, we say 'Aha!'" said ACT Associate Vice President and Southwest Regional Manager Karen Pennell. "We know that these schools must be doing something right." Pennell added that the Louisiana ACT Council, a group of Louisiana secondary and postsecondary educators who advise ACT on the use of its programs and services in the state, wanted to recognize those high schools that have made significant strides in increasing the college readiness of their graduates, as demonstrated by their ACT score increases over the past five years. The Louisiana schools recognized this year were presented ACT's "2007 College Readiness Award."

"This can only happen as a result of the high school's staff effort," Pennell said.

Avoyelles High School principal Brent Whiddon agrees that the success of the students on his campus is largely attributable to a true team effort among staff and faculty, and he acknowledges that the LA GEAR UP initiative has been an integral component of that effort.

"LA GEAR UP is a vital program on our campus, and I'm very thankful for it," Whiddon said. "The program's activities basically provide a roadmap to college, and for many of our students, it's their first introduction to college." As is the case with other LA GEAR UP schools, many Avoyelles High School students come from homes where the parents are not college

graduates and where there is little if any expectation of college attendance.

Pine High School principal Gary McKenzie is quick to credit his faculty for his students' improved college readiness, and he acknowledges that LA GEAR UP has been a valuable tool in an improvement effort that has continued over the past five or six years.

"Frankly, we're pretty much out in the country here, and in this rural setting, it's not entirely uncommon for a student's parents to lack a high school education, much less a college degree," McKenzie said. "As a result, many of our kids simply do not have college as a goal. That's why I like LA GEAR UP. For many students, it's the only link between high school and college."

LA GEAR UP provides a wide array of on- and off-campus college awareness and readiness activities, including summer enrichment camps and even on-campus college and career fairs. In fact, LA GEAR UP recently hosted Avoyelles High School's very first such fair, which principal Whiddon characterized as enormously successful.

"I think we had pretty much every public college and university in Louisiana represented," he said. "It was great."

LA GEAR UP has even provided students with home computers and internet access, and has a college scholarship program for high-achieving participants.

"These schools have worked extremely hard to find ways to promote the pursuit of postsecondary educational opportunities among their students, and this award from ACT demonstrates that their efforts have paid off," said Glenn Beer, director of the Science & Technology Education Center (SciTEC) in the Louisiana Tech College of Education. Beer has worked with the LA GEAR UP program since 2003, as director of the Summer/Academic Year Learning Projects component of the grant.

Among the LA GEAR UP activities Beer points to as having been particularly valuable for students and educators are 1) summer learning camps, where students spend a week on a college campus engaged in academic enrichment activities and getting a feel for the college experience, 2) a one-week guidance counselor seminar focused on analyzing EPAS scores to better understand how to meet the educational needs of students (EPAS is a Regents-funded testing initiative from ACT designed to assist middle- and high-school students in preparing for college and careers), and 3) academic year "Explorers" clubs, that promote ACT test preparation through peer tutoring. These integrated initiatives are designed to elevate the academic and career aspirations of all students in LA GEAR UP schools. For more information about Summer/Academic Year Learning Projects, visit the web site at www.latech.edu/lagearup.