



The Power of Partnership: GEAR UP Massachusetts and the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship

Recent studies show that education remains a key to financial success. In fact, Americans with a bachelor's degree earn, on average, more than \$1 million more over their lifetime than those with just a high school diploma.¹ Programs like GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) play a vital role in helping students—especially those from underserved backgrounds—prepare for postsecondary success. GEAR UP currently supports about 570,000 students across nearly 3,000 schools, where over half of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch.²

Established in 1998 as an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, GEAR UP offers six- to seven-year state and partnership grants to help low-income students enroll and succeed in college.³ Designed to be both flexible and community-based, the program encourages grantees to adopt local approaches tailored to their own community needs, which involves engaging K-12, higher education, and various organizations to work on solutions together.

Since 2018, GEAR UP Massachusetts and the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) have partnered to bring entrepreneurship education to middle and high school students across the Commonwealth. This collaboration has supported hundreds of GEAR UP students, with some advancing to pitch their business ideas at NFTE's regional and national competitions. The partnership highlights the power of combining programs to better serve students: GEAR UP offers a strong support network to guide students through middle and high school and help them choose a postsecondary path, while NFTE enhances this by equipping students with critical life skills, promoting economic mobility, and expanding career opportunities.

This partnership demonstrates the value of integrating college access programs with entrepreneurship education. By combining GEAR UP's academic support with NFTE's practical skill-building, students are better prepared for both college and the evolving workforce. Based on the success of this model, NFTE recommends expanding such collaborations, as they can help close equity gaps in education and ensure students develop the real-world skills needed for long-term success.

1 Nietzel, Michael T. (2024). College Degrees Lead To \$14.2 Trillion Gain In Career Earnings, Study Finds. <https://www.gettingsmart.com/2024/05/09/small-schools-big-umbrella-expanding-defining-and-scaling-the-microschool-ecosystem/> (accessed on 8/26/24).

2 National Council for Community and Education Partnerships. (2024). GEAR UP Across the Country. <https://www.edpartnerships.org/map> (accessed on 8/26/24).

3 U.S. Department of Education. (2024). Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html> (accessed on 8/26/24).

About NFTE

The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a global education nonprofit that empowers partners to integrate entrepreneurial education across curricula and equips youth in under-resourced communities with the skills, connections, credentials, and real-world experiences needed to lead change and own their futures. Since 1987, NFTE has reached more than a million learners worldwide.

Expanding Entrepreneurship Education with GEAR UP MA and NFTE

Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, Robert Dais, the Statewide Director of GEAR UP Massachusetts, recognized the value of integrating entrepreneurship education into the state's programs. He and his team incorporated the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) into their seven-year federal grant under the financial literacy category. "Financial literacy alone doesn't equip young people with the skills needed to advance their careers," Dais explained. "Entrepreneurship education has the potential to create intergenerational opportunities for youth."



Robert Dais

Since initial program implementation during the 2019-2020 school year, GEAR UP MA and NFTE have collaborated to expand opportunities for the middle and high school students they serve. GEAR UP identifies and recruits cohorts of 7th through 12th graders from low-income schools and provides a comprehensive suite of services, including professional development for teachers and counselors, enhancement of secondary school curricula, mentoring, tutoring, scholarships, financial aid, college and career planning, and programs that engage parents in supporting college readiness. With the addition of NFTE's entrepreneurship programs, especially its BizCamp model—where students develop business plans over a few weeks, typically during the summer—GEAR UP students gain exposure to entrepreneurship and key skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and risk-taking.



Maria Paredes

The first year of the GEAR UP Massachusetts and NFTE partnership (2019-2020) coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that year, and the following three, the program was implemented either fully virtually or through a hybrid approach. In the past three years, however, the program has returned to in-person BizCamp sessions, a shift that Maria Paredes, Senior Middle School Advisor, GEAR UP at Mario Umana Academy in East Boston, MA, considers an improvement. She noted that in-person interactions make it easier to identify and address student confusion, while also fostering stronger bonds among students, encouraging idea-sharing, and resulting in more robust business plans.

Despite the different formats—virtual, hybrid, and in-person—students remained engaged with the curriculum, and several even returned for a second year. When students

do return, they often bring a new business idea or expand on the one they developed in the previous year.

Both Robert Dais and Paredes highlighted several aspects of NFTE's programs that make them an exceptional opportunity for young people and an ideal partner for GEAR UP. One key factor is that GEAR UP students who participate in NFTE BizCamps receive a stipend, which alleviates the need to choose between educational opportunities and summer work. Additionally, students who advance to regional and national NFTE competitions have the chance to compete for funding to support their business ventures. "The promise of money, through both stipends and prizes, hooks our students because it's something they rarely encounter," Paredes explained. "But they stay, and return, because they love the program." Moreover, dozens of GEAR UP alumni have been awarded scholarships, with their involvement in NFTE playing a key role, opening up new educational opportunities, according to Dais.



Students participate in BizCamp in July 2024

NFTE's program design, which includes mentorship and coaching from professionals, also resonates with students and their families. Beyond mentorship, these professionals take on the role of judges during business pitches. Recent judges from organizations like Citizens Bank and EY have further strengthened community ties, providing GEAR UP students with valuable support and connections. These interactions not only build students' confidence but also offer them networking opportunities with industry leaders, which can lead to future internships, partnerships, and career prospects.

Through their partnership, GEAR UP and NFTE have adopted a collaborative approach that has enhanced both staff professional development and student access to programs. At the start of each summer, the NFTE team trains not only the teachers facilitating the BizCamps but also GEAR UP staff, enabling them to support the teachers and provide valuable feedback to the NFTE team. This collaboration has strengthened the relationship between the two organizations, leading to continuous improvements. One significant outcome of this partnership has been the adaptation of the BizCamp curriculum for Spanish-speaking students. Over the past six years, Maria Paredes recognized the need for the curriculum to be translated and taught in Spanish. Together with NFTE, they translated worksheets, hired Spanish-speaking teachers, and created additional support for families whose primary language is Spanish. This effort led to a milestone last year when Miguel Arias, a student from East Boston High School (now at Charlestown High School), became the first to pitch his business, ComfyFix, entirely in Spanish at NFTE's New England regional competition.



Jennifer Green, NFTE New England Senior Manager, Programs, facilitates a lesson during the GEAR UP BizCamp in July 2024

As the seven-year GEAR UP grant approaches its final year, Robert Dais is exploring ways to further expand the partnership with NFTE. "Summer BizCamps have been such a success, I think the next challenge is to think about how to infuse NFTE's curriculum into the school day," Dais remarked. He acknowledges that this could be challenging for GEAR UP and its school partners, given their many existing curriculum priorities. However, he believes it's a challenge worth pursuing, as GEAR UP students continue to benefit significantly from NFTE's programs. This year's BizCamp winner, Juan Toro from East Boston High School, will compete at NFTE's National competition in October with his business, Super Sponge, after advancing through the regional rounds.

How NFTE and GEAR UP MA Shaped Amanda Braga's Entrepreneurial Path

Amanda Braga knew she had an interest in business when she enrolled in NFTE's year-long Entrepreneurship 1 course in the spring of 2019 as a junior at New Bedford High School in New Bedford, MA. Having been a GEAR UP MA student since sixth grade, Braga was familiar with various career pathways and opportunities. She was eager to take courses that would prepare her for the future, and NFTE's entrepreneurship course seemed like the perfect fit. During the course, Braga developed a business concept called T.B. Indicator, which focused on creating and selling tennis balls with embedded microchips. The microchip would act as a sensor, blinking red when the ball was out of bounds, effectively serving as a referee for



Amanda Braga at NFTE New England's Regional Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge

players. With her pitch for T.B. Indicator, Braga won her classroom and school competitions, which took place at Babson college, advanced to the New England regional competition, where she secured second place, and then progressed to NFTE’s National Pitch Competition in the fall of 2019. Throughout this journey, Braga received coaching, mentorship, and support from both GEAR UP and NFTE staff, as well as professional volunteers.

Braga was first introduced to Babson College during the regional competition held there. Babson has held the #1 ranking in entrepreneurship by U.S. News & World Report for 30 consecutive years and was recently named the second best college in America in the WSJ/College Pulse 2025 Best Colleges in the U.S. report. With support from GEAR UP MA, she prepared her college application and FAFSA with Babson in mind. After being accepted, she was named Babson’s NFTE scholar, which awarded her a renewable full-tuition scholarship for all four years of her program. “NFTE was my introduction to Babson and led to my interest in going there,” Braga explained. “Then GEAR UP was the fuel to get me there. With NFTE’s scholarship, I wouldn’t have been able to afford the college experience I had.”



Amanda Braga at her college graduation at Babson College

During her time at Babson, Braga remained actively involved with NFTE’s Alumni Network and even returned to the New England NFTE team as a Marketing Fellow and intern. She also co-presented with Jennifer Green, NFTE New England’s Senior Program Manager, at the 2021 National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP)/GEAR UP annual conference, where they highlighted the NFTE/GEAR UP MA partnership and Braga’s personal experiences. Braga continued to contribute by serving as a business coach, further developing her leadership and coaching skills. Reflecting on her experience, Braga noted, “My entrepreneurship class and full NFTE experience were more helpful to me than taking standard subjects. Instead of learning how to ace a test, it helped me progress in the real world.” She credits her entrepreneurial mindset, which she cultivated through NFTE, for her successful educational career and her early professional success.

During the summer of her junior year at Babson, Braga completed an internship at Dell Technologies, which led to a full-time job offer after her graduation in the spring of 2024. Now living in Austin, Texas, Braga works as a Client Technical Sales Specialist with Dell Technologies and continues to apply the entrepreneurial mindset she learned from NFTE in her daily work. “I especially learned how to be more solutions-oriented, how to recognize opportunity, and be flexible and adaptive,” Braga shared. These skills have helped her navigate her move to Austin, adjust to a career in sales, and thrive in various work environments—whether virtual, hybrid, or in-person. “I am a better employee, team member, and salesperson because of maintaining an entrepreneurial mindset.” As for the future, Braga often thinks about returning to entrepreneurship. While she is focused on progressing in her sales career, she hasn’t ruled out the possibility of revitalizing T.B. Indicator or pursuing other entrepreneurial ventures.

Recommendations for Expanding GEAR UP and NFTE Collaborations

The collaboration between GEAR UP Massachusetts and the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) highlights how partnerships between college access programs and entrepreneurship education can significantly enhance student outcomes. As these programs offer distinct but complementary benefits—GEAR UP focusing on college readiness and NFTE providing practical, hands-on skills in entrepreneurship—scaling up such collaborations could help bridge the gap between academic preparedness and real-world career readiness.

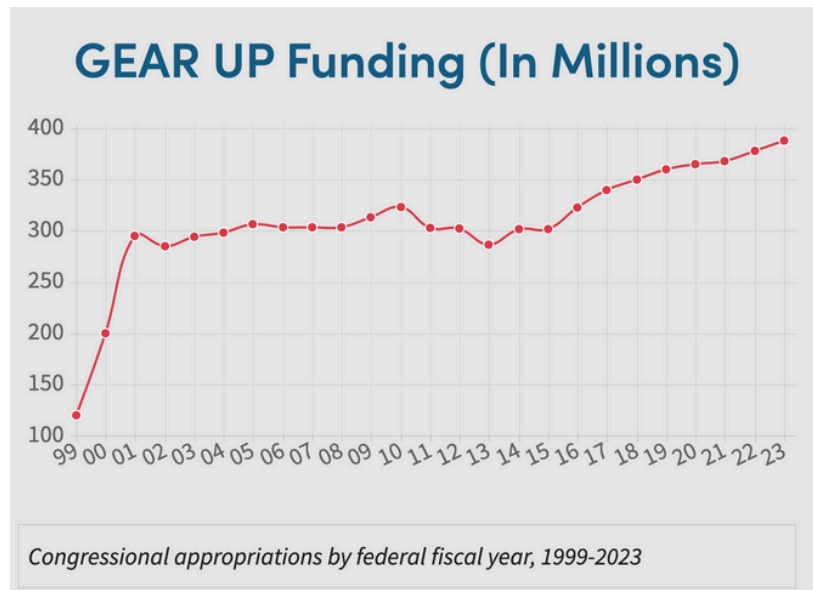
To expand and strengthen partnerships like GEAR UP and NFTE, the following recommendations should be considered:

Prioritizing Funding for Entrepreneurship Education in Federal and State Grants

Federal programs like GEAR UP should continue prioritizing entrepreneurship education within financial literacy and career readiness initiatives. In FY 2023, Congress allocated \$388 million to GEAR UP, marking a \$10 million increase from the previous year.⁴ However, this increase still leaves many eligible students without access to the program. With growing demand, participation in GEAR UP has become highly competitive, with less than 1 in 5 applicants receiving funding.⁵ As a result, many communities in need remain underserved. To address this, funding should be further expanded to reach more students and provide broader access to these vital resources.

Additionally, policymakers can allocate specific resources to ensure that GEAR UP

grantees have the capacity to adopt and expand partnerships with organizations like NFTE. Offering additional grants or incentives for schools to adopt entrepreneurship curricula could expedite their integration. Legislation aimed at reducing the administrative burden on grant applicants, enhancing GEAR UP data collection and research, and preserving state and local flexibility in program implementation—while incorporating recommendations from partners and programs like entrepreneurship education—would strengthen GEAR UP programs and expand opportunities for young people. A comparable bill was introduced in Congress in 2019 but did not advance. Renewed efforts to push such legislation forward could significantly enhance the educational landscape and better prepare students for the workforce.⁶



Source: National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, 2024

Increase Awareness and Access to Entrepreneurship Resources for the GEAR UP Community

Each GEAR UP grant is designed to address the unique needs of the communities it serves, resulting in a decentralized approach to planning and implementation, explains Alex Chough, President of the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP), the national association for GEAR UP. While this flexibility allows for tailored solutions, it also makes it difficult to establish a standardized approach to partnerships across different states. To expand the reach of programs like NFTE, greater exposure is needed through professional development, conferences, and thought leadership, increasing the chances of entrepreneurship education integration into more state and partnership GEAR UP grants.

To support this expansion, Dais emphasizes the importance of sharing best practices. He shares that one of the primary obstacles is building a comprehensive understanding of financial literacy and entrepreneurship among educators, organizations, and GEAR UP staff. This understanding is essential for advocating for and embedding entrepreneurship education in future GEAR UP proposals. Developing this knowledge is critical for expanding opportunities to more students and communities nationwide.

⁴ National Council for Community and Education Partnerships. (2024). About GEAR UP. <https://www.edpartnerships.org/about-gear-up> (accessed on 8/30/24).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Congress.Gov. (2019). S.303 - GEAR UP for Success Act of 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/303> (accessed on 8/30/24)

NFTE and GEAR UP in South Florida

In the summer of 2024, GEAR UP Miami launched an in-person, five-week BizCamp during the second year of their grant, targeting 8th and 9th graders from their cohort system. This initiative was a collaborative effort between NFTE and GEAR UP, designed to offer a holistic approach by integrating the BizCamp with existing programs and services. Student recruitment was a joint effort, with NFTE advertising at a College and Career Fest at Miami Dade College, while GEAR UP vetted applications. Forty students were selected and divided into two classes, each receiving \$300 in seed capital to help develop their business ideas.

Throughout the program, students were required to create an app for their businesses and earned Intuit's Design 4 Delight (D4D) and Google Cloud certifications. NFTE provided facilitators and interns, while the GEAR UP team offered classroom support. To accommodate students and families, an in-person orientation was held, along with virtual classes on Juneteenth and July 5th to ensure no instructional time was lost. Financial literacy workshops from Dade County Federal Credit Union, virtual coaching from Everfi and Santander, and support for non-English speaking families were key elements of the program. Two students advanced to pitch their business ideas at the Grant Cardone Foundation, where they toured the facility and presented their concepts to the team.



Student semifinalists at the GEAR UP Miami BizCamp in summer 2024

This BizCamp represented a new partnership between the NFTE Southeast team and GEAR UP Miami, marking the first significant collaboration between these two entities. NFTE has been exploring opportunities to expand its presence in other GEAR UP programs, and this successful partnership serves as a model for future initiatives. The collaboration demonstrated how NFTE and GEAR UP teams can effectively work together to support students, leveraging their combined resources and expertise to enhance educational opportunities and foster student success.

Conclusion

The partnership between GEAR UP Massachusetts and the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) demonstrates how combining college access programs with entrepreneurship education can significantly enhance student success. By blending GEAR UP's academic support with NFTE's skill-building, students gain both college readiness and the entrepreneurial mindset essential for today's workforce. Expanding such collaborations across the country equips more students with critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills—fostering economic mobility and career opportunities.

To scale these partnerships, it is crucial to prioritize funding for entrepreneurship education and increase awareness of available resources within the GEAR UP community. Sharing best practices and integrating entrepreneurship into more GEAR UP grants will help more students from underserved communities access these life-changing opportunities. By continuing to invest in these collaborative programs, we can ensure that students are prepared not only for college but also for success in their careers and beyond.

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