CG students to get college-prep help

By SUSAN RANDALL, Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, January 28, 2013 9:52 am

Seventh-graders and their families at Casa Grande Middle School were told Wednesday that they and other seventh-graders in the Casa Grande Elementary School District had "won the lottery."

John Acedo, Gear Up site support specialist in central and southern Arizona, said only 19 schools in Arizona have the Gear Up program to help prepare the class of 2018 for college. Those seventh -graders will be nurtured, mentored and treated to visits and summer programs on college campuses to inspire and motivate them to plan and prepare for college, not just dream about it.

Norma Gomez, Gear UP coordinator at the middle school, said she will work with the seventh-graders this year and through eighth grade, high school and even the first year of college to help them stay in school, improve academic performance, increase their graduation rate and increase their knowledge about college options and financing. They will have interventions, tutoring, test preparation, summer enrichment, financial aid workshops and other services available.

Northern Arizona University and several businesses have matched the seven-year federal grant to fund the program.

Kia Warner, Gear Up coordinator at Cactus Middle School, said scholarships for seventh-graders are offered with details at finaid.org. Most are based on community service. The winner of "Doodle for Google," on the other hand, will win a \$30,000 scholarship, a free trip to New York, a laptop and tablet computer.

Donna Davis from Expect More Arizona said Arizona's citizens need to understand how important education is.

"How many of you want your child to grow up, get a good job, be self-sufficient and not live with you for the rest of their lives?" she asked.

The world is changing, she said. Today's smartphones have more technology than the first rocket ship that went to the moon in 1969. Technology moves fast, eliminates jobs, creates others, and schools must prepare children for jobs that don't yet exist. Arizona kids will be competing with kids in other countries for those jobs, and India has more honor students than the United States has total students.

Davis said 30 percent of people age 25 to 34 in Arizona have two- or four-year degrees; in Massachusetts it is 54 percent. In Canada and Japan it is 56 percent.

"At Expect More Arizona we believe that every student deserves a world-class education that prepares them to succeed at college and career and life," she said.

If Arizona continues to fall behind in education, its economy will be at risk because industry will not want to move here.

The statistics are bleak, she said: 22 percent of Arizona's high school students do not graduate on time; 53 percent cannot qualify for placement in a state university class; 59 percent take remedial classes at a community college. Eighty-five percent of jobs in Arizona now require a two-year college degree or higher education. "High school is no longer the finish line."

Davis urged parents to stay current with news about Arizona education, make academic success a priority at home, talk to their children about what they are learning in school, connect with their children's teachers and remind their children: "You're not living here past high school."

Debra Raeder from the Arizona Business & Education Coalition said ABEC also has a Gear Up grant to create a middle school career exploration and planning pilot at CGESD.

A few years ago, the state gave the ACT college entrance exam to 20,000 high school juniors to help them realize that they were more prepared for college than they thought.

The results showed that they were not prepared at all, and the senior year was not enough time to catch up. The ACT Explore exam was created to help eighth-graders identify what they wanted to do in the future and plan for the education they need to achieve it.

College is important, Raeder said, because high school dropouts have a 20 percent unemployment rate and can expect to earn roughly \$7,400 a year. High school graduates have a 14 percent unemployment rate and can earn about \$22,000 on average. People with some college have an 8 percent unemployment rate and average \$32,000 a year. People with four-year degrees have a 5 percent unemployment rate and average \$60,000 a year.

Arizona's new Common Core Standards are a building block to college and career readiness, she said. Parents can help children set goals, have a place and time to study, use math and reading skills every day, make sure they have enough sleep, exercise and healthy meals and let them see their parents reading and talking about what they read.

CGMS Principal Sylvia Trotter said she wanted all of her students to attend a university or two-year college and be successful, because when she is a little old lady, she wants them to be the district's superintendent, principals and teachers — and the nurse who takes care of her.

"You can all do this," Trotter said. "You just have to set your mind to it, and there is a lot of help out there."