The 2020-2021 school year has proven to be a trying yet transformative time for all of us in GEAR UP Achievers. We interviewed 5 GEAR UP site coordinators from our GEAR UP districts to understand how and why they needed to act quickly and adapt their school-based practices to a distance learning model. Losing touch with students or families due to a virtual setting was not an excuse and a site coordinator in Kent School District put it bluntly when she said, “that's why we're here in the first place, is to support students and families.” The following article details several themes GEAR UP site coordinators emphasized in their efforts to build meaningful relationships with students and families, and develop and maintain connection in a time of distance learning and the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Virtually - I think it is a lot of our parents and students appreciating somebody really taking the time and talking to them and calling them.”
- KSD Site Coordinator
Why are we making meaningful relationships?

One major responsibility for our site coordinators is to make and maintain meaningful relationships with their students, as this alone could bring tremendous benefits for our students and our programs. Once rapport is built between site coordinators and students, it can help the site coordinators to better support our students. When students and site coordinators have friendly, open relationships, students are more likely to approach site coordinators with concerns and questions they have about the school, and their lives in general. When students are able to be honest with their site coordinators, the site coordinators can approach the questions with sufficient information to find the best possible solutions and options for the students.
Finally, making meaningful relationships not only helps students to find tailored solutions to their questions and navigate different programs and systems, but it also helps site coordinators to improve GEAR UP programming. By talking to students and listening to their honest responses after attending events, workshops, or virtual field trips, site coordinators are able to make improvements on future programs and create new programs that best fit students' needs and interests.
As GEAR UP site coordinators know that building meaningful relationships is key to truly supporting students and families. The following are the various approaches and methods of site coordinators who have been working all school year to figure out how to best emotionally connect in a time of physical disconnect.

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They should be able to reach out to me and say 'Hey, I don't know who to talk to about this,' I could be the right person for them, but I also will be able to help them figure out who that person is, that they need to find." - TSD site coordinator

Consistent across all GEAR UP coordinators was a desire to be a trusted, go-to person if any student or parent/guardian had questions or concerns about anything. They know that schools can sometimes be confusing to navigate or families don't know who to reach out to. GEAR UP coordinators' want parent(s)/guardian(s) to know that they are available to help in any way possible. In order for GEAR UP coordinators to figure out how they can be the most supportive to students and families, they first have to learn what that support looks like. Building relationships early on is crucial so that the thought of going to college seems familiar and obtainable because students and families know there is a team of people behind them who have been there since middle school.
You can’t quantify how much someone’s growth is like mentally, emotionally...I see some of my students have grown so much through these past couple months, but what’s being reflected is grades and whether they're attending events..." - KSD site coordinator

GEAR UP coordinators understand families and students to be much more than data points and want success to be defined differently. A Kent School District coordinator says, “You can't quantify how much someone's growth is like mentally emotionally, and just overall...I don't think the full potential of our students is really captured in the data, because I see some of my students have grown so much through these past couple months, but what's being reflected is grades and whether they're attending events and stuff like that.” GEAR UP coordinators want to humanize student data and make sure that students are recognized for more than academic achievement.
Site coordinators have learned what are the best and most relevant opportunities for students and families by listening. A Kent School District site coordinator does this by "[Being] consistent with checking in on them, whether it's like email or Teams chat, and then really remembering what your previous conversation so, then you can bring that back into. The next meeting, 'Okay, so we talked about this, how is it going now? 'or 'I watched this anime you recommended. What's the next show?'... so it's like little things like that." A site coordinator in Auburn agrees that, "Recalling details about students' lives from previous conversations and expressing interest" is meaningful for students and families. She continues, "So, if someone shares with me something exciting that's going on in their life I just kind of tuck it away, and so the next time I see them, I can. not because it's fake but I genuinely am interested um, but I feel like that's a way to show people that you're paying attention and that you're a team player." - ASD site coordinator

So, if someone shares with me something exciting that's going on in their life, I just kind of tuck it away, and so the next time I see them, I can [bring it up]...I genuinely am interested...I feel like that's a way to show people that you're paying attention and that you're a team player." - ASD site coordinator
Because there is not a school building to run into parents during this time, an Auburn School District site coordinator said, "I've definitely called more families and I ever have before during this time, because I feel like that is a way to generate and carve out some time where they really know I'm intentionally listening to them...I always end the conversation with, ‘You know you can always email me, you have my number on your phone now...even if it's like a funny anecdote that happened, or something funny that you saw,’ just to let them know like someone's here, you know, someone's here and thinking about you.” Another site coordinator in Kent School District expressed a similar open-endedness to phone calls with families, “It's really meeting them where they're at and so adjusting the times that you either like, call them or schedule meetings. And then being really intentional about what the meeting is about, so respecting families' times and asking them, ‘Okay, what do you want to talk about? How can I help? What can we do now?” Phone calls and video chats have become the new norm for relationship-building In a time when school hallways are empty, in-person events cancelled,
When a GEAR UP site coordinator chooses to video chat or call up a student or family, they do this with the intention of having real conversation and relating. A KSD coordinator schedules one-one-one video chats with students so she can "really get to know them on like a more deeper level... for example, one student told me about her struggle with her mom...things that I can resonate with." The coordinator shares what her student continued to say, “Ms. Alejandra, this is like, literally like the third time I like, ever, turned on my [camera].’ She’s like, ‘I never turn on my [camera], like you’re like the only person that I will turn my [camera] on for.” Site coordinators show that connecting with students on a personal level is possible in a virtual setting.

And as for families, an ASD coordinator remembers the power of her own lived experiences and sharing that with parent(s)/guardian(s) so that they don't feel so alone. or are too hard on themselves. She shares, "I tell [parent(s)/guardian(s)]...my own stories a lot when they come in...I'll kind of walk them through experiences I've had with my own children and let them know that...sometimes that's just a phase and you know, that it's going to be okay because it's so hard like, raising children, way harder than I thought it was going to be." By listening to and sharing personal stories, our site coordinators show genuine interest and care for students and families.
"On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I do Chat with Ms. Chau… it's fun, I get to talk to students that way… so they they book a time, we get 20 minutes, and together we try to figure out what their career plan is… I'm working with them on applications and doing recommendation letters for them… it's nice getting to know students, a little more than just being in the classes; they open up to you.” - RSD site coordinator

Site coordinators have also created recurring programming or office hours open in a drop-in style, meaning students can join when they want to without scheduling. A site coordinator in Renton created “Lunch and Learns” on Thursdays with a segment designated for the middle school and the high school: “that's where [students] talk to career speakers, and [go on] different tours… so we've had like a [video] game developer, we've had a project manager, we've had an Amazon event coordinator, and then, this week we have a nurse and an engineer.” Additionally, ASD site coordinators have a joint GEAR UP club that meets every week for virtual field trips, workshops, and connections!
Because kids interact with different ways, and I know that there's kids that are missing...I am realistic to know that there's kids who are just not showing up at all...I look at all different ways of connecting with families, because you have to find where they're at and just be sincere.” - TSD site coordinator

In a virtual setting, building a relationship can look in many different ways. As the school year started in a remote learning format, a Kent School District site coordinator shifted her priorities to respond to the situation at hand. She said, “When student engagement wasn't working in the first couple months and I really focused on family engagement, because I felt like, if I can connect with the family, maybe they'll be more support at home to get the student back online or engaged with their classes, and so that became a priority.”

Other site coordinators mentioned:

- Doing porch visits to connect with students.
- Sending home personalized postcards to let families know about upcoming events.
- Organizing GEAR UP swag pick-ups and mailing hands-on kits to homes.
"I have some families that will reach out to me 1-on-1, and be like, ‘Hey, what can my student do, how can we help them get better? ...They’re really supportive...they really want us to help their students and I try to be the mediator between their students and the teachers.” - RSD site coordinator

GEAR UP site coordinators want to support students and families in navigating, accessing, and succeeding in college. We know that this means engagement now, so GEAR UP site coordinators will continue to create opportunities for relationship-building and learning. A site coordinator in Kent School District sums it up nicely: “What I love about GEAR UP, is that we started from the middle schools, and so that these families are getting this information early on, and so the goal, by senior year, is that they're prepared, they're excited!” Each family has a different idea of what success looks like for their children and GEAR UP site coordinators want to know what that idea is so they can help students and families set and reach those goals. Reach out to your school's GEAR UP site coordinator to schedule a 1:1 check-in or attend an upcoming GEAR UP event!

GEAR UP is a federal grant, funded by the Department of Education, that provides middle and high school students from low-income families the support they need to access and succeed in college. In 2018, The University of Washington received a 7 year grant to work with four districts in South King County: Auburn, Kent, Renton, and Tukwila. GEAR UP Achievers is currently in its 3rd year, serving current 8th & 9th grade students and families.