The issue of low literacy skills among African American students is a pressing concern. This issue has been receiving increased media attention throughout this month. It was recently addressed in the Detroit Free Press on December 9, 2009, following a news conference that was held with Robert Bobb along with district and community leaders. The article discussed findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which reveal that Detroit 4th & 8th grade students had the lowest scores on the NAEP Mathematics test out of all other states. Many people assert that low literacy skills may be a significant factor in low level math scores for Detroit students.

The GEAR UP team at the University of Michigan has responded to this issue by becoming more aware of the challenges and causes of low literacy skills as well as implementing programs to specifically address literacy. The team has encountered numerous students who are not performing at grade level and who struggle with reading and writing. The team has experienced great frustration with the lack of urgency from school administrators, parents and community members in addressing this issue. This class project presented a great opportunity to get involved with what GEAR UP is doing to help address low literacy achievement among their students. As a way to help create a sense of urgency within their partner schools², our class project sought to use multimedia as an avenue to build community participation. Our strategy is outlined in detail below.

Goals

There are many goals of the literacy initiative, which include short term, intermediate and long term objectives. Throughout the project our initial goals changed based on what we felt would be realistic to accomplish in our timeframe.

❖ Short term objectives of the campaign
  ➢ Build awareness and educate GEAR UP partner schools about the issue of low literacy skills among African American high school students.

❖ Intermediate objectives of the campaign
  ➢ Bring various stakeholders together to develop a guiding team designed to begin dialogue and brainstorm solutions to address low literacy levels³.

❖ Long term objectives of campaign
  ➢ Improve literacy achievement levels among students⁴.
  ➢ Help students to develop a positive connection to reading and writing; strengthen confidence and enjoyment of reading/writing).
Hopes for the Campaign:

- Increase the urgency to respond to literacy issues in GEAR UP’s partner schools. We hope that school teachers and administrators will become more aware of the literacy problems impacting the students that they work with.
- Provide a space for parents, teachers and students to offer their suggestions on ways to address the issue.
- Begin the process of consciousness-raising (through use of brochures) about the literacy issues among African American students in particular.

Organizational Considerations

RESOURCES

PROVIDED BY STUDENT GROUP - There are several resources that we, as students, brought to the literacy campaign. In addition to what GEAR UP provided to the campaign, we formed a group focused on creating brochures as a tool that GEAR UP can utilize in their multimedia campaign in the future.

PROVIDED BY GEAR UP - There are several resources that GEAR UP brings to the literacy campaign. The campaign encompasses programs that have already been implemented such as campus visits, in school programming, and the literacy tutoring program, as well as initiatives that GEAR UP plans to start in the near future.

Budget/ Financial Expenses:

- $16,000 - Campus visits (held in the Fall and Spring semesters)
- $11,000 - Literacy tutoring program
- $3,000 - In school programming
- $802 - Brochures (estimate quote from Kinko’s for 750 brochures– retail price)

Facilities:

- University of Michigan, Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives (OAMI)
- University of Michigan, Detroit Center
- Spaces offered by schools to work with students (partner schools)

STAFF

The GEAR UP team is responsible for organizing and sustaining the literacy initiative. The team includes 6 full time staff members, 1 part time staff member, and a MSW intern. GEAR UP hired a total of 14 University of Michigan undergraduate students to serve as student leaders to work with their various literacy initiatives: 10 students help with campus visits and 5 students work with the literacy tutoring program (1 student does both).
REPUTATION

GEAR UP has been working with their partner schools since 2006. Throughout this time the team has built positive relationships within each of their school communities and among various stakeholders (parents, teachers, and students). However, as a college readiness program, GEAR UP is not often viewed as a program that can guide change around literacy. Throughout this campaign GEAR UP hopes to expand their reputation to include a focus on literacy.

Ways That the Organization will be Strengthened

Throughout this campaign, GEAR UP hopes to build closer partnerships with various stakeholders. GEAR UP hopes to utilize these relationships by becoming more inclusive of parents, students, teachers and school administrators.

While planning and developing programs various stakeholders will be utilized for input. Each stakeholder can bring something valuable to the table. Teachers, parents, students, and community members may have more experience and insider knowledge about the issue of literacy within the schools that the GEAR UP team may not necessarily be aware of. GEAR UP hopes to strengthen their organization by becoming more inclusive of other stakeholders in their planning and curriculum development process.

Expand Leadership

Building a guiding team is a major component of GEAR UP's literacy initiative. One of the purposes of the guiding team is to create an opportunity for parents, teachers, community members and community organizations to collaborate and work together to help solve this issue. The guiding team will create opportunities for open dialogue to help eliminate tension and misunderstandings between parents and school personnel so that they can better work together to solve to this issue.

Increase Experience of Existing Leadership

One of the gaps/barriers with the existing leadership within the school communities that GEAR UP works in is that schools often work independently and do not include other stakeholders in their decisions. Traditionally, school staff and administrators in urban school settings do not include parents and students when making decisions that impact students. GEAR UP hopes to increase the experience of the existing leadership by bringing different stakeholder groups together. This may be more effective than groups working separately to address similar issues. Although GEAR UP would like different stakeholder groups to be a part of the guiding team, they understand that not all people who are interested will be able to join. For school administrators who are a part of the guiding team, GEAR UP will support them in building partnerships at their individual schools.
Quick Facts

In 2005 the NAEP reported that:

- **46%** of African American 12th grade students are below basic reading level
- **38%** are at the basic level
- **15%** are at the proficient level

According to the 2009 ACT Profile Report regarding African American students in Michigan:

- **78%** of students did not meet the college readiness benchmark for English
- **87%** of students did not meet the benchmark in Reading
- **98%** of students did not meet the benchmark for all of the subjects combined (English, Reading, Math & Science).

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**Build Membership Base**

Through this campaign GEAR UP seeks to increase the urgency needed to respond to literacy issues facing their partner schools. They hope that all tenth and eleventh grade students, along with families, teachers and administrators will get involved in helping to address the issue on a large scale. Currently, GEAR UP is not able to provide programming for all of the students in their partner schools. They hope to increase their membership base of tenth and eleventh grade students.

**Expand Into New Constituencies**

Currently, the GEAR UP cohort includes a focus on tenth and eleventh grade students and parents. The GEAR UP team hopes to expand this constituency to include all students at the high school level.

**Internal problems to be considered if the campaign is to succeed?**

1) **Experience.** This will be GEAR UP’s first time engaging in a large-scale change initiative. They plan to use multimedia as a major tool to build community participation, but do not have much experience in using multimedia as an organizational tool. The GEAR UP team has been exploring different mediums to reach stakeholders including: creating a Facebook account to reach out to students; developing a literacy brief and brochures to reach out to parents, teachers, and school administrators. They hope to increase their knowledge about social media outlets in order to reach a larger audience.

2) **Competing Demands.** There are other demands of the GEAR UP team. The team is rather small for the amount of work that they have to do. They have to create programming that fits under different umbrella’s (college readiness/ in school programming, summer program, Saturday academy, tutoring program, etc.) and consequently, the literacy initiative may not always be a priority. Staff members have other special projects that are equally important and may take away from time needed to truly develop and sustain the literacy initiative.

3) **Time.** Traditionally, GEAR UP focuses their programming on college readiness. It will take the GEAR UP team additional time to restructure programming to include a focus on literacy. Thus, the literacy initiative may not begin as soon as the team would like.

4) **Limited Resources.** The GEAR UP budget is a set amount for the six year grant period. The OAMI office has provided some financial support for GEAR UP, but has received some cutbacks, so GEAR UP is not receiving as much financial support as in previous years. In addition, salary increases impact the budget. There are some programs within the budget that focus on literacy (i.e. campus visits), but the budget does not account for expenses needed for additional literacy initiatives. These financial issues ultimately limit the ability to undertake large-scale outreach and the expense of multimedia usage needed to sustain the literacy campaign.
Constituents, Allies & Opponents

- **Constituents**
  - Students (that are in GEAR UP)
  - Parents/Community Members (within school/community)
  - Teachers/school staff (within partner schools)

- **Allies**
  - GEAR UP
  - Teachers (outside of partner schools)
  - Community Members (city-wide)
  - Community Organizations
  - Elected/Appointed Officials
  - Policy Makers

- **Opponents**
  
  Many of our allies could also be opponents depending on their willingness to help and/or support GEAR UP’s literacy initiative. For example, there may be administrators and teachers who do not want to join the guiding team. (They may be seen as opponents). However, at this point there are no identified individuals/organizations that are a barrier to the literacy initiative. Some may assert that individuals who know that there is an issue with literacy, but chooses not to do anything about it is also an opponent. In that case, our opponents will include a large range of groups: teachers, school staff, school boards, parents, community members, etc. who fill that it is either not their responsibility or who choose to ignore efforts to improve literacy.

Targets

GEAR UP recently created a list of targets for the guiding team. The list includes students, parents, teachers and school staff from GEAR UP’s partner schools who have supported GEAR UP’s programming. These constituents have shown great interest in the work that GEAR UP is doing and may be interested in joining the guiding team. The brochures that we were able to create specifically target parents and school teachers/administrators (with an emphasis on joining the guiding team).

Robert Bobb may be a target of the literacy campaign (or a possible target for the guiding team). Currently he serves as the Financial Manager of Detroit Public Schools. A recent newspaper article discusses Robert Bobb’s criticism at the news conference that was held on December 8, 2009 regarding students’ low scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It is stated that “in an interview with the Free Press, he [Robert Bobb] pitched the idea of creating a Reading Corps of volunteers to help students improve reading skills” (Pratt & Erb, freep.com). Bobb also mentioned the need to toughen the school curriculum and increase training among teachers.

Additionally, Bobb promised that he would hold community meetings for the input of allocating the $500 million of stimulus dollars. These meetings would be a great platform for the guiding team to propose or challenge Bobb to uphold standards of excellence surrounding literacy. The guiding team can also begin to establish a community presence and build participation at these meetings.
Tactics

During this project we have utilized a variety of tactics in order to establish and meet the short-term and intermediate goals of the project.

- Formed a project group to partner with GEAR UP to address the urgent issue of literacy. In joining an established agency that has been organizing around issues of literacy, we committed ourselves as allies in this fight and helped to strengthen the overall campaign against local and state educators/administrators as our targets.

- Held meetings with GEAR UP project coordinator, Lumas Helaire. These meetings have been strategy-based meetings to further discuss the direction of tactics toward our targets and how to fully utilize and maximize the outcomes of these tactics.

- Created educational-action brochures to inform parents and administrators of the urgency surrounding literacy.

- Provided people with an opportunity to join with GEAR UP and discuss their role, feelings and thoughts about literacy. This opportunity allows parents and administrators to become stronger allies of GEAR UP.

** Please see project binder for additional materials outlining our involvement with GEAR UP**