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Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies**

Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative, administered by the U.S. Department of Education. My name is Nicholas Mathews and it is my pleasure to submit this testimony on behalf of the 707,000 GEAR UP students served in over 3,800 secondary school this year. Given the program's return on investment, I urge the committee to appropriate \$375,000,000 for GEAR UP in fiscal year 2019 to support an additional 70,000 students across our country so that they, too, may in life after high school.

As you know, GEAR UP provides 6- or 7-year grants to states and partnerships comprised of K-12, higher education, and community-based organizations that strengthen the pathways to college and careers in low-income communities. GEAR UP identifies whole classes of 7th graders and exposes them, their families, and their schools to comprehensive interventions that follow them through high school graduation and optionally through the first year of postsecondary education. GEAR UP uses early and sustained interventions to ensure that students are successful in rigorous courses, are knowledgeable about the steps necessary to prepare for life beyond high school, and ultimately enroll in a high-quality certificate, associates', or bachelors' degree program that suits their goals. In the most recent year in which substantial numbers of GEAR UP students graduated high school, the postsecondary

enrollment rates of GEAR UP students were over 31% higher than low-income students nationallyⁱ. Considering that GEAR UP achieves this critical goal at a cost of approximately \$500 per student, per year I strongly believe that the investment in GEAR UP pays significant dividends. Since the federal investment is matched at the local level with non-federal funds, GEAR UP is a powerful catalyst for sustained improvement.

I grew up in North Las Vegas. If you watched the Nevada news when I was in middle school, you would hear quite a bit about my community. More times than not, you would be hearing about it for all the wrong reasons. Out of the shadow of the glimmering lights of the Las Vegas strip, my reality was shaped by trying to navigate the crime, appalling violence, and drug abuse that my peers and I saw every day. Within this context, my home was something of a rarity. I was blessed to have two working, loving parents at home—my father worked hard as a security guard, my mother in retail—and an exceptionally bright older sister who looked out for me. While my family was my sanctuary, the norms of my neighborhood were impossible to ignore. For many of us, no matter how badly we wanted to pursue college and a meaningful career, that type of future felt hopelessly out of reach. To this day, I have a tough time accepting the agonizing hopelessness that many of our children feel.

Looking back, there were three critical barriers that I am not sure I would have been able to overcome if it were not for GEAR UP's support. First, while I had my family, I had very few role models in the community and as such, expectations of what we could achieve were shockingly low. For many of my peers, going to prison (or worse) seemed far more likely than going to college. Second, while my family always emphasized the importance of education, there were limits to the specific guidance they could provide. Getting help with my courses,

navigating the complex college enrollment process, and finding a way to afford college required a level of expertise that was not easy to find. Lastly, the schools I attended—despite their best efforts—simply did not have a strong college-going culture, where high school graduation and some form of higher education for every student is the expectation.

When I came into the GEAR UP program, the GEAR UP educators immediately engaged me, challenged me, and cared for me as if I was one of their own. I will never forget how hard Ms. Williams, Mr. Gaithier, and the rest of the GEAR UP team worked for us. They created an environment where the pursuit of academic excellence wasn't something to be embarrassed about and taught us to embrace our leadership potential. GEAR UP worked with us early on to help us realize that the things we quietly aspired to—a great education and a rewarding career—were attainable. They taught me to take ownership over my actions and worked with my family and me to make an actionable plan. They pushed me to take the most challenging academic courses offered. On top of this, GEAR UP provided me with top-notch tutoring and mentoring and worked with our teachers to be more effective instructors.

GEAR UP made the unimaginable real for me and my cohort. I had never set foot on a college campus during my early years, nor could I even imagine being allowed in. When I came to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) for the first time as a high school freshman through GEAR UP, I realized that I indeed belonged there. This was a profound and transformational realization for me and my entire class. GEAR UP helped my family navigate the long and complicated road to enrolling in and financing higher education.

Our high school saw benefits from GEAR UP, as well. In 2008, our high school graduation rate was 42%. The following year—with the graduation of my GEAR UP class—that rate

increased by 11%, and through ongoing work, has further increased to 67% in 2016ⁱⁱ. Obviously, there's still a long way to go, but that type of improvement has a profound effect on communities.

With GEAR UP's year-round support, I became the first male African-American valedictorian in my high school's history, graduating with a 4.72 grade point average. I completed a full load of Advanced Placement courses my junior and senior years, which helped me earn college credits early. I ultimately earned a full-ride scholarship to UNLV, where I earned a bachelors' degree in psychology. With the GEAR UP staff encouraging me to embrace my leadership potential, I first became the captain of my high school's basketball team, then President of the Theta Sigma Undergraduate Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. and finally, Parliamentarian of the Black Student Organization during my time at UNLV.

My story is not unique within the larger GEAR UP community. I have been fortunate to be part of a GEAR UP Alumni Network, where I've met and collaborated with GEAR UP alumni from Oklahoma, Connecticut, and nearly every state represented on this committee. What I have learned is that GEAR UP works everywhere: in rural communities, small towns, the inner-city, red states, and blue states alike. I have been so appreciative of the work of GEAR UP that after I graduated from UNLV, I went to work for the Nevada State GEAR UP Program, where I am a GEAR UP Ambassador at Nevada State College.

In this role, I can fill a critical need in my community by creating mentorship programs for young men of color as well as organizing an annual Men's Youth Conference, where young men of color between the age of 14 and 18 develop their leadership skills, college and career readiness, entrepreneurial spirit. We connect these remarkable young students to the business

and community role models that I couldn't access when I was their age. For my colleagues and me, GEAR UP isn't a job, it's a purpose.

Looking ahead, I recently completed the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and expect to earn my Ph.D. in clinical psychology. I will launch a clinical practice in the very communities that need them most—like the community I am from—and I will create a large-scale mentorship program for disadvantaged young men of color so that they have the support and tools they need to succeed.

I often see our elected officials discussing how education is so critical for our workforce, our citizenry, and our nation's competitive advantage on the global stage. I agree wholeheartedly and believe that GEAR UP is an important contributor to our nation's success. As you take on the hard work of preparing the fiscal year 2019 appropriation, our community urges you to consider a modest increase for the GEAR UP program to \$375,000,000, an increase of \$25 million over the prior year, so that 70,000 new students can benefit from the program as I did.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning and I will be happy to respond to any questions.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Education. (2016). FY 2017 Department of Education Justifications of Appropriation Estimates to the Congress: Higher Education (Volume II). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget17/justifications/index.html>

ⁱⁱ Nevada Department of Education. School Accountability Summary Report, 2007-2008; 2008-2009; 2016-2017. Retrieved from <http://nevadareportcard.com>