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McKinney students 'AVID' about learning

By TRICIA SCRUGGS
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A former California teacher's determination to see kids live up to their true potential has thousands of students across the country, including 400 in McKinney, rising to the challenge.

Advancement Via Individual Determination is what students and the program's supporters say makes the difference between a school career based on just getting by and one that leads down the road to college.

"It helps kids exceed that normally we have allowed be present in the classroom without finding out what their best was," said Kathy Arno, director of advanced academics for the McKinney school district. "We call them the students in the middle."

Their grade point average is between 2.0 and 3.0, so they're passing, she said, but they could be doing better.

They're not failing and they are not getting straight A's, explained Adriana Fletes, the AVID campus coordinator at McKinney North.

"We look for that B/C student," she said. "We do not want a student who's already performing at a level in which we're not going to be able to help them."

To participate, students must have a good attendance record, demonstrate the potential and desire to attend a four-year college, be willing to enroll in pre-advanced placement (Pre-AP) and advanced placement (AP) courses and to commit to a minimum of two hours of homework each night.

"It's really been great," said sophomore Sarah Morris. "It's helped me a lot. Before AVID I was always kind of motivated and I knew that I wanted to do well, but AVID gave me direction and helped me improve overall."

She said she has been able to maintain high grades, and also to "think on a higher level."

A recommendation to the program by a teacher, faculty member or a current AVID

student, and an interview is required. Each campus determines who qualifies and is accepted to the program.

AVID seeks to increase the number of students going to college by enrolling them "in a school's toughest classes."

According to McKinney Independent School District data, 95 percent of AVID graduates enroll in college. The Center for Research and Evaluation in Education found 70 percent of AVID students nationally enroll in four-year colleges and universities.

"The best thing about being an AVID teacher is that I know when I walk into a classroom, for the most part, the kids want to be there," Fletes said. "They take the initiative of enrolling in the course."

The elective is a daily class where students are prepared to be academically successful and better their social skills.

"I believe truthfully that AVID is meant for both," said student Christina Blakely. "Because as Ms. Fletes stated, when I first came in, I was a B/C student. My eighth grade year when I entered the program, I ended my year with all A's and that continued through my sophomore year and then this year I entered AP courses. Now I'm an A/B student but I'm working hard."

Blakeley started the program in its first year while a student at Scott Johnson Middle School.

"For me it's been an improvement in my grades and an improvement in my attitude and how I [approach] people," she said. "I've never been a really shy person, but there's always those times when you meet someone new and you put up a wall because you don't really want them to know who you are. AVID has opened that part of me up. I'm just real with everyone."

After seeing the positive results of the program, Blakely recommended her friend Romina Obiedo. The high school juniors have already decided on New Mexico State University, where they'll room together, because it's out-of-state but still close to home.

"It helps you develop as a person," Obiedo said. "When I came to the program

I was quieter. Also, it teaches you to work better as a group. AVID is like a family and you feel more comfortable in that environment."

Ruben Chavira touts the program though he hasn't participated since his freshman year.

"French [One] happened. That's what happened," said the senior student, explaining how not passing the challenging class two consecutive semesters ended his AVID career. While in the program, he said, he was more disciplined and despite leaving would suggest AVID to other students.

Students say when beginning the program, especially in eighth or ninth-grade it is difficult adjusting to the higher demands and expectations, like answering hard tutorials questions.

"When you get to the AP courses and have to take the SAT and ACT, those are the type of questions they ask you," Blakely said. "When you go ahead and prepare your mind at a younger age, when you get to the higher levels you're already prepared."

To remain in the program, students have to maintain an 80 percent or above in college preparatory and elective classes and 75 percent or above in Pre-AP and AP classes.

Freshman Nyasha Kemp is in her first year with AVID. She said the encouragement received from Fletes has helped.

"She's always had that drive. That push," Kemp said. "She'll tell me, 'Nyasha you need to pull up your grades. You're not doing so well here and you need to step up your game.' So that's what I'm doing."

AVID students visit colleges, get help with their applications, serve as guest speakers to other schools, businesses and colleges to educate them about the program, dedicate time to community service projects and increase "coping skills" and awareness of career opportunities.

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Sophomore Daniel Kamal brags about his smarts, demonstrating another character trait AVID fosters, confidence.

"It's a great program," he said. "It helps with everything and it prepares you for college."

The program pulls parents, counselors, administrators, subject area teachers, tutors,

colleges and universities and the community in to provide a collaborative support system for students.

"As a teacher, I find that most of the AVID students have a little bit more drive than other students that I have in class," said Rolando Corinaldi who teaches Pre-AP World History. He said AVID students

check with him to find out whether or not there will be homework.

"Usually other students are like, 'He didn't say anything. Let's go,'" Corinaldi explained. "But that to me lets me know that AVID students aren't there to play around."