

Madison's AVID/TOPS Gets Positive Evaluation from WISCAPE: Proven Effectiveness

By Jonathan Gramling

Earlier this month, the Madison Metropolitan School District released the results of a study by the Wisconsin Center for Advancement of Postsecondary Education (WISCAPE) that showed the AVID/TOPS Program, a collaborative program of the district and the Boys & Girls Club, was having a positive impact on the academic performance of African American and Latino high school students including higher GPAs, enrollment in more advanced courses and lower behavior referrals.

This news was received enthusiastically, yet cautiously by Michael Johnson, the president/CEO of the Boys & Girls Club.

"I think it is the investment and the time," Johnson attributed to AVID/TOPS success. "We have a steering board that is made up of local

community leaders, whether it is the Burke Foundation or the Great Lakes Higher Education Corp. or the CEO from WPS. We meet with them on a quarterly basis and get feedback from them. What I love about our program is that it isn't a cookie-cutter program. We're always tweaking it and changing it. And so, this year we did a career exploration program. This year, we assigned mentors to some of the students in the program. I think the real success of it is the individual teachers who are in the classroom who are supported by the tutors who come in twice a week."

Johnson also attributed its success to the outside-the-classroom activities the students must participate in that enhance what they learn and give them insights into their own academic and career futures.

"When I was a kid growing up in public housing, the first time that I left the community was when I went to Indiana State University,"



Boys & Girls Club President/CEO Michael Johnson (center back) and 2010 graduates of the AVID/TOPS program at East High School.

Johnson recalled. "You've seen all of the vans that we got donated to the club. So we take our kids on field trips in the schools during the school day once per month. We think that experience is very, very important. And our kids keep binders. They have to take Cornell Notes to keep track of what they do. We have a coordinator who is assigned to each one of our kids. And we the school district AVID/TOPS coordinator once per week so that we are constantly communicating and looking at the individual success of every single child. Our student coordinators are responsible for that. I think the investment, the tutors, the teachers and the field trips have all played a major role in this program."

While Johnson is pleased with the effectiveness, he also emphasizes that the study was for only for a one-year period and there are some aspects of the program that he feels need to be improved such as its retention rate.

"I think retention at most schools is around 30 percent," Johnson said. "I think on average, we're around 40 percent. We want to make sure that moving forward, we can retain students in the program. At the same time, this is a rigorous program with rigorous courses. Our expectations are high. And our students have to maintain a certain GPA."

Johnson dismisses suggestions that AVID/TOPS is the cure all for the achievement gap for students of color. Right now the program is working with 250 kids and he sees the program topping out at 800 kids unless they receive a dramatic increase in funding. In Johnson's view, AVID/TOPS serves a niche of students of color in Madison's schools.

"When you look at the number of students of color in Madison, I'm only going to be able to serve so many," Johnson said. "Kaleem Caire's program with Madison Prep is only going to be able to serve so many. The PEOPLE Program is only going to be able to serve so many. So we believe that you need a multitude of different approaches to help close the achievement gap. When we saw in the press that we should just sit fast with the AVID/TOPS Program, that is not necessary. Even if folks gave us a ton of resources, I just don't think you should put all of your eggs in one basket. Let the results speak for themselves and then people can determine options. When you go to a restaurant, you can decide to go to Perkins or you can go to McDonalds. Our school system and programs should be the same way."

To underline that belief, the Boys & Girls Club board passed a resolution last week in support of Madison Prep.

And for now, MMSD and Boys & Girls Club have their franchise for academic success humming.

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